Chapter Twelve

Dr Firdousa's attempts to hold back Shaheen until Rukhsana was married off were once again neutralised by Shazia Parveen, the Principal of Girls' College. She called on the Mirs on the telephone. 'In fact,' she continued after asking for the reason of Shaheen's absence, 'I wanted to tell you people that 'they' have already arrived in the valley and are preparing for the wedding.'

Earlier that day, Dr Firdousa had Shaheen locked in her room. She supervised Gopa, who placed the *Wurusi* planks in place, till the end. She then had Rukhsana take an oath on her dead grandfather, Khawaja Samad Mir, that she would not give in to the heartfelt pleas of Shaheen.

Shaheen, unlike earlier times, did not oppose her confinement by vehement cursing and shouting obscenities but with silence and ardent requests, which terrified Dr Firdousa.

When Dr Firdousa left for work and was about to cross the heavy street door, she turned back and took Rukhsana with her. 'Your 'Law' can wait,' she said, holding her arm. She dropped her near the street of Chinar Ghar to make sure that Shaheen stayed locked at Mir Manzil. Only then did she walk to the Kashmir Medical College and Hospital to do her duties.

All day, Shaheen kept on asking for her release by invoking the names of the saints and prophets, and sometimes by begging in the name of God.

Raja Begum, who had supported Dr Firdousa on all previous occasions, was overcome by the heartfelt appeals. She began to feel the pain that Shaheen was going through, and asked Gopa for the keys to the lock. She clambered the wooden stairs with slow open steps and was panting when she reached the corridor. She had to call Gopa again to open the lock because of the heavy shaking of her hands.

But Shaheen did not come out, and refused to take her meals. 'It's four o'clock already,' she said to Raja Begum. 'What good is a release when all those who were waiting for you have their hearts broken to bits?'

Raja Begum sat with her on her ruffled bed and asked her the reason for her heartfelt condition. Shaheen, like her mother, did not divulge a single word about her love. 'We were going to celebrate Arifa's birthday after college today,' Shaheen lied. 'Now she will think that I'm inconsiderate.'

'I'll call her and apologise on your behalf,' said Raja Begum.

'Inconsideration of this sort,' said Shaheen, '... needs a personal touch.'

In the evening, before Raja Begum could ask Dr Firdousa to release Shaheen from captivity, Shazia Parveen called on the telephone. Dr Firdousa did not dare approach Raja Begum for advice but waited for Rukhsana to return from Chinar Ghar.

Rukhsana encouraged her and assured her that Shaheen would do nothing that could harm them. 'In fact,' she said to conceal her knowledge, 'she is my good luck charm.'

'I doubt her mannerism,' confided Dr Firdousa. 'But I trust your insight.'

Later that night, Rukhsana crossed over the *Wurusi* and sat with the distressed Shaheen. 'I would die,' Shaheen confided in her, 'if I don't see Rizwan… He is the light of my soul.' She looked deep into Rukhsana's eyes and found room for solace. The two sisters, sitting on the ruffled bedding, hugged and felt the warmth of love they both needed. 'I'm so selfish,' Shaheen acknowledged after a while. 'You are a guest of a few days now. Then you would be gone to God knows which place.'

'Colorado,' Rukhsana replied with a hidden smile.

'You know the name,' replied Shaheen. 'Not the place.'

'I'll consider it a rebirth.'

*

All Kashmiris considered it a rebirth when young men and boys came out unscathed from a crackdown. It was not a huge crackdown that covered a large area over a period of four to five days, but a shorter version in which the main purpose was not to frighten the civilians into submission but to weed out militants through identification by masked *Mukhbirs*. The *Mukhbirs* sat inside the green vehicles while the soldiers held boys in front of them for identification.

When the crackdown was over, Commandant Krishnamurthy asked his men to release Rizwan and his friends. 'He is a champ,' he told his men. 'Show some respect.' He had him brought over to his Maruti Gypsy. 'The doors of the stadium are always open for you,' he said, '…Rizza Padukone.' He waited for Rizwan to say something in return.

But Rizwan did not answer him. He was terrified and still subdued by the overnight humiliation. The sudden gesture of goodwill brought a surge of tears that threatened to leak from his eyes. He had to pull the muscles of his eyelids up to create space for the liquid to remain within the boundaries.

'I'd love to have a game with you someday,' said the Commandant. He picked up a yellow golf cap from the glove box, placed it over Rizwan's dishevelled hair, and motioned for his chauffeur to move. Rizwan was left wandering in the days of his glamour, Rizza Padukone.

He had come around from a hopeless situation. In fact, everyone in the stadium, even Rizwan himself, did not believe that he could actually defeat Nasir-the-Ace, in the qualifying round. The coaches went out to take some refreshment, knowing that Nasir would finish him in two straight games.

'I bet,' said the Junior Coach, 'it will be a Love-game.'

'Never underestimate the caprice of chance,' replied the Senior Coach on his way to the canteen.

Rizwan, who had been terrified by the outcome of the draw, overheard the conversation of the coaches. At that moment, he was pushing his arms through the yellow shirt and his thoughts were occupied by his Father's words: '*Hope is the much-desired conflict in life. Without it, life would not have been possible.*' When he pushed his arms through the half sleeves and got his head out from the shirt, he was in a different world. A world filled with hope and optimism.

He looked up and found the space above the court, bursting with hope. He looked around and found the scarcely occupied chairs filled with hope. Hope rose from below the dilapidated wooden flooring of the arena. Hope hovered in the space in the suspended lights that had stopped working years early.

He rose from his haunches and began stretching. When he was done stretching, Nasir allowed him to practice with long, lofty shots. Then he asked Rizwan to serve first, knowing that he would finish the match before the two coaches came back from their short tea-break.

The match lasted for two and a half hours. Nasir won the first game fifteen-love. But Rizwan did not lose hope and won the second game by a margin of two points only. The third game lasted for two hours. No one remembered how many times the 'service- change' was pronounced by the match referee. In the end, Rizwan's hope prevailed, and at the thirteenth point, Nasir lost.

Now, with his hair chopped and just released from the virtual grip of death, Rizwan wondered if life could ever be so beautiful again.

*

It was mid-May, and flakes of poplar seeds were floating in the air when Rizwan spotted Shaheen. She seemed low-spirited, and her gait was missing the usual Shaheen-type flamboyance. He continued to watch her as she walked among the numerous uniformed girls. She was alone. '*Where was Bublee?*' He wondered and swallowed one flake. Instantly, he started coughing.

Intrigued by the coughing across the Residency Road, Shaheen stopped in her steps, turned around, and spotted Rizwan wearing a yellow golf cap. Her eyes turned wet, but she held the tears back and resumed walking.

She walked past a *Bhel-puri* vendor on the Pratap Park walkway. A few steps ahead, she stopped, turned around, walked back and asked the *Bhel-puri* vendor to prepare a *puri* while she faced the small brick wall, one of the many island walls placed at uniform intervals in the steel fencing of the park. She took a black ballpoint pen from her satchel and scribbled on the red brick.

'How much chilli, Madamji?' The vendor asked.

'Yes,' Shaheen replied without hearing the question properly. The pen failed to make any mark on the coarse surface of the brick. She dropped the pen, picked up the hairpin from her hair, opened the U-bend a little, and began scratching on the brick.

By that time, Rizwan had reached near the *Bhel-puri* vendor. He stood there looking at what Shaheen was doing. When she had scratched a faint 'MISSED

U' on a brick and continued to make the scratches deeper, Rizwan felt the pin scratch at his liver. He bled in silence while the *puri*-vendor shook the *Bhel* in a paper cone.

He felt the tear split his being. He longed for her angelic hand with heart-shaped fingernails to touch him where the pin was tearing him apart, and heal him. At that moment, a light breeze intensified the raining of poplar seed-flakes, and it seemed as if a heavy snowfall had commenced at the outset of summer.

Shaheen, once done with the scratching, looked at Rizwan with a face that admired his love for her. She appreciated the way he looked at her, respected her and wanted her so badly and madly. She revered all his mannerism towards her. She stayed there for a while so that he could look at her face to his heart's content, and then she walked away with hastened steps.

'*Puri*, Madamji,' the vendor said while holding the *puri*.

Rizwan took the *puri*, paid and contemplated the words 'MISSED U'. Then he bent down and picked up her pen with the damaged nib. He put the pen in his pants pocket as a souvenir. He went across the road, asked for a nail from a dark-skinned cobbler, hurried back to the park side and scratched on the same brick in detail how her absence had made him contemplate suicide.

'One day,' he scratched, '...is like one intolerable lifetime for me. Please inform me about your routine so I know everything is all right when you don't turn up.

But please try to come every day … for my sake.'

The next day, they did the same thing, and the day after, till the small island of the brick wall became the replacement for Bublee.

When they had exhausted one island of a brick wall, they turned to the next and the next after that. They had to bring in the sharpened nails with them so that they could carve out their message on the bricks. Then, it occurred to them that they could also play Tic-Tac-Toe at the same time. They drew doodles, wrote jokes and cried about the absence of Bublee.

Nevertheless, in the snowfall-like rain of the poplar seed, the brick wall became their new and permanent interface where they could go back in time and reread the messages they had already read a thousand times.

'Let's run away,' Rizwan scratched once, '…from this God-forsaken place. Let's find our world someplace else.'

'No,' scratched back Shaheen. 'Don't you ever think like that, my love. Don't you ever lose hope. Don't you ever belittle my great love for you.' She wanted to scratch his name to raise his spirits but kept the message anonymous, as always.

*

Three days before the marriage ceremony of Rukhsana, General Sikandar, Commander Kaka, Neelam Khanum, Tanvir Tiger, and Boba shifted to Mir Manzil. General Sikandar had deferred the mass participation drive till Rukhsana was married off. Two brothers met Raja Begum in the courtyard where

Shaheen was feeding pigeons on her yoga mat.

'It is not possible to kill the third incumbent,' General Sikandar began the most difficult conversation of his life.

'Looks like he has terrified you?' asked Raja Begum.

'No,' intervened Commander Kaka. 'She has circumcised us.'

'At this age?' Raja Begum gasped. '*Astagfirullah!*'

'No,' cleared Commander Kaka. 'When we were little.'

Raja Begum began to sift her oldest memories, and her eyes lit up. 'Jyoti?' She said triumphantly.

The two brothers lowered their heads.

'*Ya Allah*!' Raja Begum slapped her forehead. 'What an irony! Is it her turn now?'

'What do you mean?' General Sikandar asked.

'If it must be done, it must be done,' she said with finality.

'I cannot shoot her,' Commander Kaka also said with finality.

'Firdousa,' Raja Begum yelled, 'they gave your brothers guns. What they needed … was guts.'

It was Shaheen who had heard Raja Begum's shout, not Dr Firdousa. She came close to the trio talking under the grapevine framework.

'Did you hear what Chota Mamoo said?' Raja Begum said to Shaheen. 'He cannot kill Dr Jyoti to help your mother become the Principal ... *Bobun*

Commander!'

'What?' Shaheen asked. She walked away slowly, trying to stomach the terrible news. When she was out of their sight, she ran across the cobbled courtyard, got out of the street door, ran across the market streets, reached the crossroads, and burst through the small door of the Panditas.

She clambered the two porch steps and ran into the corridor where the three family members were arguing over whether to take all the framed photographs or leave some behind to save the number of bags. They decided to take some and leave some.

'So, you knew already?' Shaheen said with a long sigh. '*Alhamdulillah.*'

*

Dr Firdousa was given the charge of Kashmir Medical College and Hospital because Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita failed to join her duties as the new principal.

On the next day, sitting in the reclining chair of her Principal's office, Dr Firdousa was invaded by the dread of Shaheen mixing with boys at Lal Chowk. The marriage of Rukhsana was barely two days away and all her efforts might go in vain if Shaheen did anything stupid.

She wished she had never let her go to college in the morning. She could have stopped her on a stronger pretext. She had asked her to stay home to keep company with her parting-in-days sister. But Rukhsana had casually turned her down so that Shaheen would not be caged at home. 'I'm still here,' Rukhsana had said. 'No need for her to stop her life because of me.'

Dr Firdousa did not waste time and sent her stout peon, Shafa, to fetch Commander Kaka from the Operation Theatre, where he was supervising the fabrication of a concealed hideout with no doors. They wanted a foolproof place to plan their mass participation drive. General Sikandar had already talked to numerous Mohalla Committee Heads and got assurance from them that they would give him at least eleven boys from each Mohalla for the freedom of Kashmir.

Commander Kaka did not walk with Shafa to the Principal's office as the Principal had anticipated. He had the hospital staff bring in an intercom line to the fabrication site. He dialled triple-five and was connected to Dr Firdousa, sitting in her reclining chair.

'What is it, Baji?' He asked.

'Who is there beside you?' She asked back.

'No one,' he said in reply. 'General Sikandar is in the Auditorium.'

'Listen,' she said and, without wasting any time, asked him to protect his Shaheen Rani from the road-Romeos at Lal Chowk. 'They have made her life hell.'

'Right away,' he said. 'You want me to shoot them dead?'

'Nooooooo…' She hushed in the telephone. 'Just scare them away. Will you please?'

*

Shaheen reread all the messages that Rizwan had written in her absence wherein he had contemplated suicide. Then she walked ahead and reread the messages on another island brick wall on which Rizwan had scratched for them to elope. From these messages, she could gauge Rizwan's growing despair.

'Oh God,' she sighed. 'He is becoming hopeless every passing day. He needs a physical touch.' She went ahead near the fourth brick wall island because they had exhausted all the bricks of the previous walls.

She waited there and brought her left hand over her eyes to avoid the direct sun so that she could look for Rizwan among the numerous boys waiting for their love near the Regal Cinema and along the Information Building.

The message that she would not be available for a couple of days on account of her sister's marriage was circulating in her mind when, instead of Rizwan, she spotted Chota Mamoo coming out of the Journalists' Lane.

She hurried to scratch the message. Instinctively, she gave up on the idea of 'physical touch' and left the message faintly scratched because Chota Mamoo had started walking in her direction. She scampered ahead while looking backwards and rammed into the *Bhel-puri* vendor, overturning his merchandise. She did not stop to help the vendor gather his stuff but walked away briskly over the walkway between other uniformed girls to hide her identity from Chota Mamoo.

Commander Kaka spotted Shaheen when she was scratching the bricks near the *Bhel-puri* vendor. He could not understand why she was scratching on the bricks. He surveyed the entire Residency Road and found out that boys were waiting for God-knows-what near the Regal Cinema and beside the ruined Information Building. When Shaheen collided with the *Bhel-puri* vendor, he spotted a tall young man with black brows, walking towards the same brick wall that Shaheen was scratching on moments early.

Initially, he thought, on account of the gentlemanly looks of the young man, that he was walking to help the vendor gather the stuff from the walkway. But when he spotted him studying the stuff that Shaheen had scratched, did he understand the state of affairs that Firdousa Baji had tried to conceal from him.

He waited beside the footpath vendors on the Information Building side, watching Rizwan scratch on the bricks. He waited until Rizwan had read and reread the message a thousand times, then headed towards Ghanta Ghar. Then he crossed the road and read what had been scratched.

By then, the *Bhel-puri* vendor had gathered his stuff and was preparing to sell his first *puri*. He saw that one young man with an unkempt beard and raised eyebrows was reading the messages that he had seen the two lovers scratch without fail on all days except Sundays. 'You should not read other people's personal stuff,' he said to Commander Kaka without having any idea to whom he was talking.

'And why would you tell me that?' Commander Kaka asked back.

‘Love needs no defending, though,’ he said. ‘But it must be defended by all, for it is so sweet.’

‘You know what is bitter?’ Commander Kaka asked, rage building within him.

‘Green chilli,’ replied the vendor.

‘No,’ corrected Commander Kaka. ’A bullet!’ With those words, he took out his Chinese pistol and shot a single bullet into the dark forehead of the *Bhel-puri* vendor. The piercing noise of the gunfire alarmed the passers-by; the panic, as usual, sent the three o’clock crowd at Lal Chowk into a frenzy.

The area was cordoned off in a jiffy. Rizwan once again found himself standing in a long queue that the amorphous little crowd had broken into near the Ghanta Ghar. The soldier who did the frisking, recognised him and took him to Commandant Krishnamurthy, who was supervising the identification parade.

‘You have no shame,’ said Commandant Krishnamurthy. ‘I was waiting for you.’

Chapter Thirteen

Knowing that Shaheen would not be at Lal Chowk, Rizwan still left home at the usual hour. He realised that Lal Chowk was not throbbing with the usual 'tension' that love brought with it but was calm like a lake in repose. Unlike previous occasions, he was not singularly drawn to a particular route but encountered the luxury of choice.

Since he had no Shaheen to look at, he did not go to the Girls' College gate. He looked at the latest sports magazines on the folding carts near Tyndale Biscoe School. It was a long time since he had bought a sports magazine. He remembered having bought 'Times of India' for some time. He thought about the role newspapers played in the journey of his love, and a smile spread across his lips.

When he picked up the May edition of 'Sportstar', he was reminded of the 'Employment News'. It was months since he had not purchased what he had come to Lal Chowk for.

Since he had fallen for Shaheen, all his efforts had been to pursue her, and win over her heart. Now that she wasn't available for a few days, he was filled with his erstwhile anxiety of dullness and pursuit of livelihood. He looked around and found other uniformed girls walking by.

Without Shaheen, life at Lal Chowk was no more than a market routine. She made the whole place electrifying with her unsettling beauty. The market gave the impression of being sentenced to sleeping sickness. He wondered how lucky love had made him and resumed walking to get the 'Employment News' near the Amira Kadal bridge.

There, once again, his sight was caught by the photograph on the front page of the 'Sportstar' of a female athlete in a blue uniform, hitting a white shuttlecock in mid-air. He did not buy the 'Employment news' he had come to buy but paid for the 'Sportstar'. Standing in front of the vendor, he flipped through the silky pages of the colourful magazine. Without thinking about the Commandant, he walked over the bridge to go to Kashmir Indoor Stadium.

Rizwan did not have difficulty in finding out Commandant Krishnamurthy. The soldiers at the gate had already been instructed to allow the young man of Rizwan's description enter the garrison. They had only to ask him his name and welcome him. *'Aaja, Champ,'* the soldier at the gate said in his slippery voice. 'Commandant Sahb is waiting for you.'

Rizwan was reminded of his beating at the hands of the same soldiers who now welcomed him. He laughed at the transience of the life events as he walked inside the stadium parking space where he once used to keep his bicycle. Now, the very space was occupied by green vans.

The whole place gave him a feeling of open bareness typical of the barracks. There was no noise. No birds. Nothing but earth-bag bunkers, boundaries marked by powder-limestone, order and the servitude of the soldiers.

Commandant Krishnamurthy had just taken a hot bath. He was still ruffling his wet hair when Rizwan was escorted to his quarters. It was sunny and warm. A small heap of muddied snow, the size of a cow-flop, lay in the perpetual shade of the side of the entranceway leading to the Commandant's quarters. The soldier, who accompanied Rizwan from the bunkered entrance, knocked twice on the wooden door and after hearing a 'come in' command, indicated Rizwan to proceed.

The room was well-lit and warm. A woman in her mid-forties wearing a soft-green sari with a woollen blouse and shrouded by a woollen blanket over her shoulders was sitting on a sofa reading 'Time Magazine'. Her bony feet were placed in a white metallic basin from which hot steam was wafting. Beside her was a red electric blower humming gently on the sofa. The entire room was primed and gave a feeling of home away from home.

'Sit down,' she said while looking at him through the steam of her foot-bath.

Commandant Krishnamurthy came in with his wet towel, drying his hair. 'Welcome, Champ,' he said in his professional, soldierly voice. 'You couldn't have chosen a better day. We are both feeling warmed up after this harsh winter.'

Rizwan thought about the date, 21 May; it was nearly summer, and outside was a pleasantly warm sun. He said nothing to show his confusion. *"Maybe that is how the outsiders feel in the valley," he thought.* Gingerly, he sat on the single sofa seat. He sank into the large, leathery seat and felt dwarfed in front of the towering Commandant, who at that time was getting through the sleeves of his green woollen cardigan, which had white stripes at the wrists and waist. His head came out with a feeling of happiness, as if he had just broken off from a shell.

Before leaving the room, the Commandant asked his wife if she wanted to accompany them into the stadium. She said no, citing the chill that pervaded spaces with high ceilings. He did not insist.

'A court to play in, with the best in the game, is all I had wanted from life,' said Rizwan, looking at the arena.

'Is that all?' The Commandant asked.

'Yes. It is,' lied Rizwan.

The Commandant instantly caught his lie. 'There is more in your heart than the dream of a badminton court,' he said. Rizwan did not answer him. 'I'm trained to see what others die to hide,' said the Commandant. 'There is no point hiding anything from me.'

'There is nothing I've to hide from you,' Rizwan lied again.

Commandant Krishnamurthy did not investigate further and asked Rizwan to accompany him on a tour to see his erstwhile champion's glory.

The black-and-white photographs were pasted with glue by his contenders in admiration of his outstanding performance. 'This will be for the first time,' he remembered one of his adversaries with square-shaped spectacles, tell him in front of everybody, '…when competitors, instead of jeering at one another, will be honouring the talent that their core competitor is blessed with.'

Rizwan saw that his photograph, holding Junior's trophy, was spattered with abundant spits of betel juice. A burning nail went through his heart, and he looked straight at the Commandant, who smiled without any feeling.

The idea that his glory was no more than a spittoon for the soldiers intensified the devastating effects of nostalgia. He wanted to leave right there and then.

Madam Suhasini, overcome by the hospitality that she had forgotten in the haze of her steamy footbath, came to the court arena leading a soldier with a tray carrying tea paraphernalia. 'Bring me a wooden chair,' she commanded the soldier after he had placed the tray on the metallic table around which four metallic chairs had already been placed. The soldier immediately got her a wooden chair. She sat after hurling the woollen blanket over her left shoulder.

The soldier took off the crewel tea cosy from the silver-coloured kettle and poured three cups. Madam Suhasini asked Rizwan about the sugar measurements.

'One,' he said without any enthusiasm. The rage inside him was suffocating and dying out slowly under the unassailable cloak of being polite to the universal act of hospitality.

The soldier poured one teaspoon of sugar in one cup, followed by milk. He handed the cup to Rizwan. Then he gave the black, un-sugared tea cups to the Commandant and his wife.

'Those must have been the days,' Commandant said light-heartedly.

Rizwan was torn between his erstwhile fame and the insult of the spattered betel juice. He got up and asked for the Commandant's permission to leave.

'Everything is in a hurry here,' said Madam Suhasini. 'Even Kashmiri clouds in the sky. They just can't hold the rain for long.'

'This is natural for clouds at this altitude,' said the Commandant. 'What is your hurry, Rizza Padukone?' He indicated the scrawling in charcoal 'RIZZA PADUKONE' on the wall leading to the entrance of the stadium. 'Remember that?'

Rizwan was in the middle of an irresolvable crisis. Suddenly, he found repose in the memories of Shaheen. He was reminded of the message that she had scratched on the brick wall: 'Be patient for some days, my love. My sister is getting married.'

'I must go,' he managed to say finally.

'What is the hurry? Sit a while with us, Rizwan,' said the Commandant.

'My mother has an appointment with a doctor today,' he lied.

Rizwan had reached the entranceway when the Commandant shouted at him. 'You didn't tell me where you live, Champion.' Rizwan stopped for a while, looking at the charcoal scrawling. 'In case I come to visit you.'

Rizwan answered without turning his face to the Commandant, 'Ashiyana. Peer Wari.'

*

Five narrow streets away from Ashiyana, after travelling through the narrow and knotty lanes of the city, Shafat Durrani had reached his aunt's house to prepare for his marriage. The black taxi with a yellow hood dropped him on the road. With two large and bulging suitcases he waited for the porter, who never came. He had no idea what to do when a group of street children asked him where he was heading. 'I'm going to the house of Parveen Maasi,' he said in a fervent hope of finding the lane that he believed he knew by heart.

'Parveen Maasi?' A child with a running nose repeated. 'It's Parveen Babi.' Then all the children shouted in a chorus, 'Parveen Babi... Parveen Babi... Parveen Babi...'

Only then did he understand his pitiful position in the strange land where he was born some thirty years ago. He had been yearning to come to this place to see whether his childhood streets had remained the same dirty, foul-smelling knotty streets with mucky surface drains, where he played hide and seek with his friends whose names he never imagined to recollect.

But when his parents asked him to come to Kashmir with them, a month before his marriage, so that he could not only relive his childhood days there but also meet his would-be-wife, he could not get permission from his boss.

He pleaded for an entire month, and only when he disclosed that he was going there to get married did they give him a week off without applying for any leave. His Scandinavian boss granted him leave with a simple assertion, 'As many weeks as the number of wives you marry.'

"I should have come here with Mom and Dad," he thought loudly. "Now, what do I do?"

The children were terrified by his act of talking to himself. They ran away one after the other, shouting in carefree joy, 'Parveen Babi… Parveen Babi… Parveen Babi…'

Walking from the opposite direction that the carefree children were running in, two heavyset peons of Professor Shazia Parveen, who did not need to be introduced to Shafat Durrani, the nephew of their Principal Madam, greeted the traveller. He had the same round eyes, a crafty little hooked nose, and a high forehead. 'Sir,' they said in unison and took hold of the two large suitcases. 'This way please.'

Shafat Durrani followed the two men. After getting accustomed to the indifferent Haji Mohalla, he noticed that the duo was carrying the suitcases, holding them on their backs. He stopped them and then showed them that the suitcases had wheels at the bottom and could be made to run on them. That way even one man could move both the suitcases. The two peons admired the novelty of the American gadgets, grabbed the hand straps as Shafat had demonstrated, and let the suitcases trail after them. When they made a turn and found the knotty lane smeared with little heaps of dog shit, he asked them to stop and carry the suitcases the way they had done before.

He was dismayed at his inability to understand the situation and walked with slow, indifferent steps until he reached the courtyard of Parveen Maasi. There, the fragrance of sweet-smelling flowers cleared the narrow and knotty bylanes of his memories, washed the little heaps of dog shit in his mind and evoked in him a flood of childhood scenes. His eyes became moist, and he sifted with ease the ancient memories and recalled the names of his childhood friends with whom he had played hide and seek and *Sazlong*, the Kashmiri version of hopscotch. He called out loudly: 'Nissara, Manzoora, Shabira!'

Parveen Maasi came running out from the screened door of the kitchen and, instead of hugging her long-missed nephew, hushed him to lower his voice. All his childhood friends were now high-profile militants and had huge bounties on their heads.

*

Dr Firdousa had all the preparations done two days before the marriage of Rukhsana. She had become the Principal of the Kashmir Medical College and Hospital, and taken charge; impervious Iqbal had agreed to cut his hair short and not wear his tweed *Pherran* while receiving the groom, and Shaheen's uncertain ways had failed to bring any shame to Mir Manzil. She was happy, content, and willing to concede to anything and any demand that anybody asked of her. Everybody thought she was the luckiest and the most content mother in the violence-ravaged city of Srinagar.

Even Shaheen, who woke up with a feeling of having missed something, felt her mother's immeasurable happiness. But as the day progressed, Shaheen's heart sank steadily, and she longed for the memories of Rizwan. She wanted his memories to fill her up and keep her occupied. She quickly engaged herself with the protracted preparations that the aides of the bride were meant for.

She let Rukhsana's university friends apply henna on her arms, hands and feet. She obliged their little demands of bringing in warm water, toothpicks, cotton dabs, henna appliers and many other small things. The twin bedrooms became an isolated world so that only a privileged few could stay with the bride, who was now a guest of the house. The *Wurusi* was removed completely so that the girls could use the entire space for the preparations.

Shaheen remained at the door and communicated with the rest of the house when someone knocked. She regulated the traffic by bringing in hot *Kehwa* with bakery biscuits and taking out the used cups, empty kettles, and trash that had accumulated from opening many packaged items the bride required. All day, the preparations went on, and Shaheen handed over the watch-keeping responsibility to one of Rukhsana's university friends while she went around taking a look at what else was happening in the house.

Two large water-proof canvas tents were erected in the courtyard. Dr Firdousa received the female guests alongside Raja Begum in one, and General Sikandar and Commander Kaka received the male guests in another. The female tent-house reverberated with *Wanvun*. The entire neighbourhood echoed the intense lyrics. Women sang and swayed with the lyrics while others dragged Dr Firdousa inside the tent-house to join the *Wanvun*.

Behind the house, in the rear courtyard, *Wazwan* preparations were in full swing. Guests scrabbled around with running noses and dripping eyes because the smoke of the long hearth filled the neighbourhood, and flying ash gave the impression of an early snowfall.

Shaheen, too, felt the itching in her eyes. Tears clogged her view when a senior *Waza* suddenly extended a roasted sheep kidney towards her, sizzling on a skewer. 'Taste it…' said the senior *Waza*, '…with some salt.'

Shaheen pulled out the sizzling kidney from the skewer and asked another *Waza*, pounding meat on a stone, to sprinkle some salt over the kidney. She munched the hot kidney and turned to the other side of the yard, which had turned black by soaking the spilt blood of the slaughtered sheep.

When Shaheen passed by the butcher, still munching the kidney, some confusion arose between Iqbal and the butcher. Iqbal had long ago instructed the butcher to bring in only the sheep at the time of his daughter's marriage, which the butcher had promised to deliver. But the head-*Waza* had just noticed by the quantity of firewood it took to tender the mutton that the butcher had also slaughtered ewes.

They had an instant argument, which resulted in a scuffle. The dispute was settled by neighbours and other elders when the butcher confessed that some sheep were old, but he denied the allegation that he had slaughtered any ewes. He was asked to resume slaughtering while the elders watched.

Every animal was inspected before being laid for slaughtering. Tanvir and other kids brought over the sheep, holding their tails and making them walk with their hind legs in air. Neighbours checked the animals underneath their bellies for gender and the number of teeth in their mouths for age. They also ensured that the butcher said *Allah-o-Akbar* loud enough to be audible in the noisy chorus of *Wanvun*.

Shaheen left the scene and went to the ladies' tent-house where Raja Begum had brought a singing couple.

Eleven neighbours - vigorously shaking the ashes from their hair - returned at seven in the evening, carrying *Tumbaknaries* and *Nouts*. Women holding the instruments in front of them, sat around the singer in a ring while his partner prepared for the dance. All night, the singer sang songs of love and vow - of separation and fate. His partner, the woman with umbrella frock, long black hair and painted lips, danced on his intense lyrics, while the guests beat the *Tumbaknaries* and *Nouts*.

The sharp voice of the singer was so provocative that Shaheen could feel every note slicing through her. No one, who heard the songs, could stop their eyes from getting moist. The pounding and chopping of mutton stopped. The slaughtering of sheep stopped, and everyone was taken by the sheer intensity of the singer's sharp, piercing voice.

All the guests were staring at the singer when suddenly, outside the tent- house, Iqbal burst into long wails. Guests rushed outside to commiserate with Iqbal about the forthcoming departure of his daughter, and asked the singer to sing some lighter songs instead.

The lighter songs made the dancer speed up her spinning. After every round of spinning, she collected currency notes of ten and five rupees from the guests until a neighbouring male guest held her arm and whispered in her ear that she could earn so much that she need not collect notes for one full year if she agreed to come with him. The dancer burst in such a fluttering wail that her male partner stopped singing and threatened to take on the guest if he remained in the audience.

The guest was chased away by the elderly ladies who rushed back into the tent-house because outside, three masked youths clambered down from the mud-wall with their guns slung across their chests.

They barged into the tent-house and took away the wailing dancer. They took her for her dancing act, which they said was utterly unacceptable in the context of *'Sharia'*, which they were soon going to enforce once they had Kashmir as a part of Pakistan, which was later going to merge with an eventual Islamic Block stretching up to Morocco.

At three o'clock, the dancer was released because he turned out to be a man with feminine makeup and false hair. The singing-dancing couple fled before *Fajr* prayers without taking payments from the hosts.

To offset the sadness that the singer-dancer couple's plight had caused, Shaheen and Dr Firdousa showered on guests small currency notes shaped into lotuses and asked them to sing about applying henna on Rukhsana's hands, arms, legs and feet, which were already hennaed during the day by her university friends.

Amid the rumble of pounding and chopping of mutton in the courtyard, women sang about henna on the bride.

Chapter Fourteen

Shaheen woke up from her two hours of disturbed sleep filled with random dreams of Rizwan. In her dreams, he wept near the seven sad fountains, awaited her near the Ghanta Ghar, walked over the Amira Kadal bridge looking for her. He was suffocated by the co-passengers in the jam-packed mini bus asking everybody: 'Did she come down, did she come down, did she come down?'

She realised that Rizwan would not be able to bear so much sorrow. So, she got up and looked through the open window towards the mud-wall to see if he was there. Near the wall were the tent-labourers readjusting the tent poles that had been uprooted in the chaos created by the midnight raid of militants.

She felt a grating in her throat, and her nose was blocked, perhaps due to the midnight cold. She walked heavy-headed towards the washroom that looked like the one in deluge. The countless guests had turned the entire house upside down, and the place exuded the feeling of being shipwrecked.

She found a thin soap cake floating near the doorframe amidst a pool of loose strands of assorted hair. She picked up the slippery soap, washed her face and arms, and rubbed her armpits until they no longer smelled. Then she rummaged through the entire Mir Manzil to find a towel but could not find one. When

Rukhsana learnt what Shaheen was desperately looking for, she offered Shaheen her bridal towel. Shaheen refused to take the bridal towel because, by that time, her face and arms had dried up completely.

'I want a Paracetamol tablet,' Shaheen said. 'I think I have got a cold.' After taking the medicine from the medicine chest, she went out in the ladies' tent-house which was already set right by the tent-labourers, and asked a strange lady, who was in charge of the steaming *Samovar*, to give her a cup of *Nun chai*. The strange woman gave Shaheen a cup of steaming tea and handed her a round, flat bread with the baker's finger marks.

When Shaheen had finished her tea and was about to go into the bride's room, she felt that *Nun chai* had lightened up her mood, but her nose was still blocked. Once again, the thought of forlorn Rizwan came to her mind, and once again, she looked over her shoulder towards the mud-wall to see if he had come. He had not.

She crossed the male tent-house and went to see the *Wazwan* preparation. A pink-skinned man with thick, white eyebrows walked past her carrying a large brass plate filled with voluptuous cherry tomatoes. He was gripping the plate with two large cut pieces of brown towel. He was followed by a large, thick-skinned giant like the one cast from steel, holding a still larger plate of brass beneath a large heap of friend cheese. He, too, was holding the plate with the help of two cut pieces of a white striped towel.

She went back towards the porch where Dr

Firdousa was looking out towards the open, clear sky. The doctor was disturbed by a strange notion that if everything went smoothly on the earth, the heavens would find a way to ruin the occasion. It was the last Wednesday of May, and her faith in it was still dwindling.

Decades earlier, the day of her own marriage was also a clear, sunny day: the last Wednesday of September. Amid the stunning sunshine, a small, dark cloud hovered over the city just before dusk. No one paid any heed to the insignificant little cloud until Khwaja Iqbal Mir, the silk-turbaned groom, reached Chinar Ghar with his two hundred men *baraat*, excluding the numerous kids that Raja Begum had failed to count among the men standing in the cobbled courtyard of Mir Manzil.

The cloud that had spread across the evening sky in a very short period did not look threatening. When the *baraat* entered the large tent-house with crewel ceiling and silk curtains, a slight drizzle poured on its slanting canvass roof. The elders took the showering of the drizzle as a good omen. But inside her bride's room, Dr Firdousa's heart was sinking. She dreaded the worst. Her aides assured her that *Allah*, the most beneficent, was showering his *Rehmat* on her wedding.

The drizzle stopped completely barely five minutes later. *Wazwan* was served with redoubled enthusiasm because now it was clear that God was happy with the happenings. When they had served half of the twelve-course *Wazwan*, precisely at the moment when the Head-*Waza* was serving *Rogan Josh* to the groom, the dark cloud released its water content in one go. The sudden rush of water flooded the Chinar Ghar courtyard. In the chaos of the instant flood, the hosts lost their bearings first. Then the tent-house flattened. *Wazwan* crashed, and the fast-moving water carried pots through the tall vegetation and out into the river because the barrier of the mud-wall had fallen apart.

And from the openings of the canvass tent-house, *baraat* members swam out one after the other and were rescued by the hosts standing near the porch. The uncounted children were seen floating on large copper plates with nibbled sheep ribs and chicken legs. Chota Mamoo, standing on the porch, jumped in the flood waters to recover the silken turban that the groom had set aside so that it did not interfere with his eating.

Terrified aides of the bride looked from the windows of the bride's room, but the bride did not move from her place. Dr Firdousa took it as unambiguous retribution of *Wahid-ul-Qahaar* for having loved a married man and marrying an innocent bachelor.

But on the last Wednesday of May, she was convinced that nothing of that sort would happen because Rukhsana had not even plucked one young rose from the numerous bushes in the courtyard, let alone infringing on any commandment of God or man. She was pure *Lal Ded* stuff.

So, when she saw that the sky was blue and cloudless, she sighed in relief. Everything in the sky and on the ground was far from threatening.

Despite the manifold engagements of the bride's mother, a smile that could not be wiped off, stretched her lips across her cheeks. At that moment, Shaheen passed by her on her way to the bride's room. '*Allah* is obviously showering *Rehmat* on Mir family,' she said to Shaheen. 'But you never know when his caprice makes him a *Qahaar*.'

Shaheen did not understand what her mother was saying and answered purely out of habit. 'Whatever,' she said in her reedy, choked-nose voice. 'I wonder if he, too, craves for company.'

*

Alone and craving for Shaheen, Rizwan was writhing with fever in his room, babbling incoherently in the slippery realm of sweat and giddiness. Outside, Mansoor was delivering an acrimonious lecture in the street. 'I prefer to die than not know what is going on.'

He was referring to the dark, hardened trail that ran distinctly in the middle of the shabby street. He came to know that it was the blood trail of Vishal Bazzaz, the seven-foot giant who was shot twice by Kaka Towel while selling silk garments in his wooden shop. The customer, a well-known grey-haired war psychiatrist, had looked in awe as the blood spurted from the huge, rooster chest of the shopkeeper.

When Commander Kaka saw Vishal Bazzaz putting a round-neck silken shirt on the boy, the lady with white hair was accompanying, he was reminded of his father, Mohammad Sultan.

Kaka, unlike his elder brothers, refused to don the used shirts that his father had carefully sorted out from his merchandise. But he grew so quickly that he needed a new shirt every two months. That was when Mohammad Sultan shouted at him in the square: 'Either you don the used shirts or stop growing.'

For the next six months, the shirt did not shorten on him. His body grew so imperceptibly that even his clothes failed to realise. When Mohammad Sultan died of insignificance at the age of forty-seven, Chota Mamoo grew abound. He grew the tallest of them all, and could match the Mirs in height when the marriage proposal of Dr Firdousa was initiated.

Nevertheless, after being shot in the chest, Vishal had tried to run away from his shop, and Kaka allowed him to go into the street, knowing that the giant, staggering under the immense weight of his own body, wouldn't be able to go far.

Kaka waited until unsteady and terrified Vishal reached the bridge in full view of the square. Kaka strode to him and shot him in the leg. Vishal fell with a pounding thud. The bridge shook with a quiver. The old, metallic railing on its sides rattled momentarily, convincing the neighbouring women that the earth was shaking. They came out on the street holding their kids, chanting aloud the Arabic verses: *Ash -hadu un La ila ha illalLah... Ash-hadu un La ila ha illalLah...* Vishal, on his large knees, begged for life. Kaka shot him the fourth time in the head.

'Just because he did good business.' Mansoor shook his head. 'Or because he was so big? What is happening to us?' He began in his steady teacher's voice. 'India is bent upon giving us mass death. Pakistan gives us nothing but false hopes. And now this

Kaka…who is he to give us dead neighbours?'

No one in the street who heard him was of any significance. Because those who were, were watching the fifth one-day cricket match between India and Pakistan. The series was tied at 2-2.

Secluded in his bedroom, without having seen Shaheen for two straight days and with no hope of seeing her that day or the day after, Rizwan's unsteady head began to give in to lover's misgivings.

He heard his father's lecture in the haze of his fever. He was terrified. He thought about Shaheen, and it gave him some hope. Suddenly, he wanted to take a bath, but his mother discouraged him completely. 'It'll increase your fever,' she warned him. Dismayed, he slipped through the screened door and ran into Mansoor, who was coming in from the street door. Rizwan did not say a single word, knowing that he was too dizzy to say anything sensible.

Despite his high fever and uncontrollable shivering, Rizwan left his house, believing in his delirium that he would somehow reach the 'Lost Paradise' houseboat. He walked too involved in Shaheen's thoughts and noticed nothing else. The square was full of people, and it was as if a celebration was going on.

Rizwan walked in his dizziness without bumping into anybody. When he was unsure, he asked the people, talking in small groups, about the route to Dal Lake. They took him for someone unfamiliar with the ways of Srinagar city, gave him detailed instructions and indicated with their outstretched arms: 'There. That by-lane. Then turn left…'

Later, when he had a clear idea of the route, he was taking, he learnt that it was on account of the lunch-break in the match that so many people were in the streets. All along the route to ‘Lost Paradise’, people came on the streets and talked cricket. Some younger ones went along, blowing an imaginary ball in the air. The mere notion of bowling gave them the necessary kick that gatherings in Kashmir inspired.

Nevertheless, when Rizwan reached the ‘Lost Paradise’ houseboat, the five diehards were glued to the black and white television set. They had to make an effort to disengage from the action on the television and recognise him in the haze of their passion as someone who looked like Rizwan; the second innings was already underway.

Rizwan had black stubble on his ashen, wrinkled face. His hair was deranged, and he walked like a dead man but breathed like a sprinter. ‘What has happened to you, *yaar*?’ They all asked in unison.

‘Did Shaheen say something?’ The sensitive Aadil inquired.

Rizwan did not answer.

‘Has something happened to her?’ Imtiyaz, the pragmatic fellow, asked.

‘Has she married someone else?’ Gudda said with a tinge of laughter.

Rizwan’s breathing was calming as he took the barrage of questions from his friends. His eyes were on the screen. ‘Miandad is out,’ he said.

There befell a sudden and comprehensive silence because outside, the entire valley had become soundless. The mere act of Rizwan's heavy breathing seemed like sacrilege. 'I haven't seen her for two straight days,' Rizwan said a while later to break the unbreakable quiet. 'Imagine!' That, too, was incredible and seemed more serious than Miandad's early dismissal.

'Either we watch the match,' said Showkat in a raised voice, 'or we listen to what this *Majnu* has to say. You can't take both seriously at the same time, *yaar*. It ruins the very taste of it.'

Rizwan recounted his story while Waseem brought him a glass of water. He had not eaten a morsel for two days. He refused to eat or drink altogether. He wanted to see Shaheen or be dead. 'You decide,' he confronted Showkat. 'You get me there or get me to the graveyard.'

After a protracted debate, while Pakistan was certain to fall short of India's mammoth total of 273 runs, the five die-hards decided to take him to Shaheen. Rizwan agreed to show them the place where the marriage was happening. They left at seven in the evening. When they reached the market, people were bursting firecrackers. They were astonished at who had done it since Miandad was already out. In the Chowk, people praised the new hero: Mansoor Elahi, the tail-ender.

*

The sound of firecrackers raised the spirits of Dr Firdousa. She had confused the celebration of Pakistan's victory with the coming of *baraat*. She couldn't help it because both things happened at the same time.

When things got clear to her, she asked Tanvir to watch out for inconsiderate people urinating in the street against the mud-wall. He was instructed to stay there and allow no one to urinate till the *baraat* had left with the bride. But when the news of Pakistan's victory reached him, Tanvir went inside to get his stock of firecrackers that he had brought over from Chinar Ghar. He went out to the Chowk to burn the firecrackers because Commander Kaka did not allow him to burn his lot inside the courtyard.

'We have esteemed guests coming here,' he had said.

Shaheen was woken up from her thoughts by the lyrics that the women started singing:

'Shouq-e chaneh waa-ye chang-e-nai saazo ... Aakho Shaher-e-Sheerazo...Aaaakhoo-o-ooo... Shaher-e-Sheerazo....'

Unlike Iqbal's *baraat*, it was a very small one. At the decorated street door, nervous Iqbal received the groom and kissed his forehead. The groom, with a plain milky-white turban, was accompanied by a few elderly men with white beards because Shafat did not have a single friend to accompany him during the all-critical walk from the courtyard door to the tent-house. Women showered dry almonds, coins and flower petals on the groom. They inspected him and gauged his character from his gait and the way he looked around.

What astonished them was the breath of the American perfume that his tightly-sewn Sherwani exuded. He walked serenely as his father held his nervous left hand. At the entrance of the decorated tent-house, Commander Kaka went down on his haunches, removed the groom's traditional shoes and guided him to his raised place at the centre of the tent-house.

Outside, the valley was mad with celebrations.

Dry fruit with bottled apple juice was served immediately. *Wazwan* was served warm. The dishes were served in proper sequence and on time. Nothing much spilt on the floor of the tent-house, and no one, in general, was displeased. Recluse Iqbal behaved properly. Militants did not intervene. Even the fastidious Raj Begum could not find any fault with the immaculate arrangements that Dr Firdousa had made in coordination with her two brothers. Everything and every single bit went as per plan. The guests ate to the point of exhaustion and were feeling queasy in the tent-house.

The father of the groom, Dr Salah-ud-din Durrani, content and jubilant, asked General Sikandar to prepare the bride for departure so that the other guests of the *baraat* did not have to wait unnecessarily.

'It is already nine o'clock,' he said with utmost decency. 'Tonight, soldiers must be mad with rage.' Once he was done with General Sikandar, Dr Salah-ud-din Durrani nodded 'yes' to two middle-aged guests in their brand new milky-white suits, who motioned with their two raised fingers on their lips. He understood that they were yearning for a smoke and whispered to them: 'Do it outside, please.'

General Sikandar, totally conciliatory - like all

Mamoos at their niece's wedding - without wasting any moment indicated to the women on the porch to prepare the bride for departure.

Dr Firdousa wept the tears of her inconceivable joy as she looked at the clear sky, full of stars and a big bright moon. She was relieved. Her *Lal Ded* was about to go far from the mad city and its insinuations. She hugged Boba, standing beside her, who said with a clear heart, 'Now you realise what I must have gone through when you departed.'

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It took six friends nearly two hours for the distance of a quarter, because Rizwan, in the delirium of his fever, had forgotten the way. But he expressly forbade everyone from asking directions from strangers. He was aware of the moral hazards of love, and they kept taking the wrong routes.

They were nearly hopeless until they met little Tanvir in the Chowk. He asked them to burn his leftover firecrackers because it was time for the *baraat* to leave. That was when they learnt that they could have reached there before the match was even over. Nevertheless, they took his firecrackers but followed him stealthily.

When the five die-hards spotted the coloured wedding decorations hanging from the roof and spread over the grapevine framework, flashing in the darkness of the early night, they shook hands with Rizwan and wished him well. But Rizwan asked them to help him mount the mud-wall so that he could see Shaheen wherever she was in there. They agreed but warned him about their hazardous presence. 'Come on, wait for me,' he implored them. 'I'll just look at her… and then go back with you.'

They raised Rizwan on their shoulders against the mud-wall. He scanned the courtyard. His feelings were overpowering his grip on the Flame vine. He had still not been able to conquer his malaise.

At that moment, when the friends of Rukhsana were preparing her for departure, Shaheen looked through the open window, was alarmed and asked in her choked-nose voice, to be excused.

She hurried down the stairs, brushed past the ladies arranging themselves in the rows for departure *Wanvun*. She scampered over the assorted footwear spread around the tent-house and reached the part of the wall where she had sensed Rizwan's movement. In the clear sky above was an enormous silver moon dashing towards a dark, ominous patch of cloud.

Shaheen found Rizwan atop the Flame vine with three days of stubble, ashen eyes and a wrinkled old face, flashing in the colourful lights of the decoration. Her heart leapt for him. But instead of greeting him with love, she simply told him to please get down from the wall. 'What if anybody had seen you?' She asked him in her reedy, choked-nose voice. Rizwan did not move because he was absorbed in the movement of her upper lip, which had a sudden dip in profile at its centre. Her reedy, choked-nose voice clutched at his heart.

A tender, magnetic wave itched under his skin, making it excruciatingly difficult for him to stay tranquil. He ached for her touch. His condition was so fragile and so amorous at the same time that he only needed a kiss to fall apart like a mud-wall under heavy rains.

'She is about to leave,' she warned him. 'Please don't create a scene.' She could not control the pitch of her choked-nose voice.

The two guests in milky-white suits had just finished smoking when they heard some noise near the wall. One of them said to the other, 'You urinate; I'll look at what's going on.' One fellow came down on his haunches and urinated over the surface drain. The other went to the spot where five friends were supporting Rizwan from behind.

'What are you people doing here?' He asked the five friends. They did not say anything.

At that moment, Tanvir came to the spot and abused the guest who was urinating against the mud-wall. When he realised that he was a guest of the *baraat*, he retraced his steps and went inside.

Shaheen heard the voices from outside and could no longer hold her dread from exploding. 'Go away,' she told Rizwan with a firm voice. 'Go away, please.'

The insulted guest, who had just finished urinating, joined his partner and had a scuffle with the five friends.

'Who are they?' Shaheen asked Rizwan with authority.

'My friends,' he replied weakly.

'You came here with friends?' She began in her reedy voice, '...with friends? ... To ruin my sister's marriage? Get lost.'

She raised the finger of her right hand and warned Rizwan of dire consequences. He saw the finger changing colours in the flashing of the decoration lights. Her green iridescent dress made her irresistible. Rizwan felt like a blind man looking at the most beautiful tyrant in the entirety of God's world.

The shock choked him. He could not say anything in his defence and only managed to lower his gaze. Below, at the ground level, ran the surface drain with the spicy refuse of *Wazwan*.

Women, who were about to sing the departure *Wanvun*, heard the commotion and ran to the scene. Men, who had finished serving the *baraat* followed them. In the chaos that followed, the two guests came rushing into the tent-house and whispered into Dr Salah-ud-din Durrani's ears loudly enough for everyone to hear.

'The bride's sister is talking to the boys over the mud-wall.'

Dr Salah-ud-din Durrani's huge ears became upright, and his face turned red with indignation. At once, he sat down and consulted a few of his senior guests, who readily approved what he proposed. Then he got up and announced, 'We cannot take our bride from a house whose daughters display love over the mud-wall. What a shame!'

Dr Firdousa slapped her forehead.

Chapter Fifteen

Wearing his black, customary towel over his head, Kaka came to the street door of Ashiyana and, without knocking, walked in. Inside, Nishat Bibi had just come out on the porch to ask Rizwan to come down from his room. She had cooked the lake-fish that Mansoor had brought from Amira Kadal.

'You didn't do the right thing,' she scolded Mansoor before coming out.

'I couldn't unsee a thing that I've seen,' he replied.

'When entire Kashmir could unsee it, why couldn't you,' she said disdainfully. 'Sins-of-mine!'

'Don't you worry about me,' he said. 'Just make sure that Rizwan eats today. It's been four days now. Tell him we've got his favourite carp.'

She was about to call for Rizwan when Kaka came in with a black towel spread over his head. Nishat Bibi froze at his sight. Her mouth remained half-open without making any sound. Her dread was real. She looked at him while standing in front of the screened door in a subconscious attempt to stop him from going inside.

'Won't you ask your guest for lunch,' Kaka said without emphasising any particular word. 'What happened to good old Kashmiri hospitality?'

Nishat Bibi got confused. She made way for him to come in.

Rizwan heard the news of Kaka Towel's arrival in his room. He was still struggling with the pain in his buttocks when his mother came to his room asking him to come down. 'Who will save your father now?' She said.

Rizwan did not answer her because he knew that Kaka Towel had come for him, not Mansoor. He waited while Nishat Bibi went down with unwilling steps.

Rizwan went to the kitchen and decided to throw his life in the hands of fate. *"If my time is over, nobody can save me," he thought.*

He lifted the *Tasht* and *Nari,* and without greeting Kaka, placed the *Tasht* in front of him and started pouring water straight away. Kaka washed his hands while looking straight into his eyes. A vicious smile appeared on his face. 'Truly,' said Kaka, 'Srinagar is a very small place.'

Rizwan did not answer. Mansoor got the answer to his itch, but Nishat Bibi was confused evermore.

They served him boiled rice and fish. Mansoor picked the tiny fish bones and passed the fried carp pieces to Kaka's plate. Rizwan was trying to decipher Nishat Bibi's misapprehension until it dawned on him that she, too, could be right. In the haze of his misadventure, he had completely forgotten the acrimonious lecture of his father. They could both well be Kaka's targets. Ashiyana was about to be finished.

"Could it be averted?" he thought but readily gave into the age-old advice. "Wait. Be patient."

Kaka ate to his fill while three family members served him with utmost care and hospitality. Kaka belched loudly when he was done. Rizwan once again poured water from the copper *Nari* over the *Tasht*.

When Kaka had washed his hands, Mansoor handed him a towel and presented him with a ceramic plate containing premium toothpicks. Kaka carefully chose one toothpick and began dislodging the fish remnants from his teeth. He spat the remnants wherever he pleased.

Kaka got up amid the earnest request of the hosts to stay for a cup of *Nun chai*. He said he was in a hurry because IB agents were corroding the uprising, and it was his responsibility to wipe them out. He crossed the corridor while the family walked behind him in silence. He pushed the screened door open and slipped into his white sneakers. He kept the toothpick moving between his teeth as he walked.

When Kaka was about to cross the street door, he turned to Mansoor. 'Won't you see off your guest, Mansoor Sir?' Mansoor nodded and followed him barefoot.

Rizwan understood the purpose of this sudden visit, and walked close to his father. When they had reached the square, Kaka stopped and looked at Mansoor. Closely behind him was Rizwan, and awaiting at the street door was a forlorn Nishat Bibi.

'IB agents don't have horns, Mansoor Sir,' he said.

Mansoor could say nothing. Rizwan lost the feeling of his guts. Kaka turned to Rizwan and said: 'Don't you go back. Your 'philosopher father' may need you.'

Rizwan did not have the time to cover his father because, at that moment, Kaka had already taken out his Chinese pistol and shot three successive bullets at Mansoor's chest. Rizwan froze in his position but leapt at his father the moment he collapsed.

'Now I've made sure,' Kaka told Rizwan, still moving the toothpick between his teeth, 'that you'll have nobody to bury you,' he continued. 'I'll come for you when you are done with your father.' Then he walked away as if nothing consequential had happened.

Mansoor died in silence in Rizwan's arms. He did not struggle much. Three shots made it easy for him. Nishat Bibi's was the sole cry heard in the entire neighbourhood. No one came forward to see if Mansoor was dead or alive. The shopkeepers closed their shops and fled. Women who had craned their necks from their windows, banged the windows shut and called out for their kids to come home. The square was deserted in an instant.

Rizwan waited for a while, not knowing what to do. Then the truth dawned upon him, and he realised there was no point in waiting for anybody. No one would come to shoulder a dead killed by the bullets of a militant, more so by Commander Kaka's. He got up and dragged Mansoor's body over the rough surface of the road. He saw that his father's fresh blood formed a continuous trail that, at one point, crossed the dark trail of Vishal Bazzaz. The crisp May air solidified

Mansoor's bloody trail, too, so that one could barely tell which one was whose.

Nishat Bibi saw Rizwan struggling to drag his father and ran to help him. Mother and son dragged Mansoor Sir across the street door, placed him on the porch and contemplated. 'We'll be the ones doing the washing and burying,' she said without crying. 'Now we are the outcasts.'

*

After causing a public scandal, Shaheen locked herself in the twin-bedroom with the dismantled *Wurusi*. For three straight days, she refused to eat any meals and vowed never to face any human being again.

Dr Firdousa, fearing that she might do anything more unpleasant in public, did not force her out but prepared herself with a list of medical explanations in case Shaheen hurt herself in the room. She was relieved on her part that Rukhsana, the light of her soul, was safe with her wise husband, whom Mirs revered as a saint.

On the night of the marriage, Dr Salah-ud-din Durrani picked up his guests one by one and led them outside the tent-house where they sifted among the heap of footwear for their pair of shoes. Then he asked them to leave because Durranis were not so shameless as to take a bride whose sister exchanged love with six street boys over the mud-wall.

The hosts could not muster the courage to ask for forgiveness. Raja Begum was tormented but did not speak a word. Taciturn Iqbal, helpless with words, did not even think of intervening. Dr Firdousa thought of asking Dr Durrani about any possible reconciliation but did not, thinking it would add to their shame.

Boba was the only one who did not lose hope, but she too was helpless. The tent-house was nearly empty except for Dr Durrani and the groom. The groom did not get up from his place and asked his father what was going on. 'I thought we were going to take the bride with us tonight,' he said innocently. 'That's how I had understood the tradition.'

'You are right, son,' answered Dr Durrani. 'That is in case the bride is worth taking.'

Shafat Durrani's large earlobes became erect. His angelic eyes widened, and he asked energetically: 'What's wrong with my bride?'

'She isn't worth taking.'

'What's wrong with my bride, Papa?'

'She isn't worth taking.'

'What's wrong with my bride, Papa?' Shafat insisted.

'It's complicated, son,' said Dr Durrani in consternation. Then, after a long pause, he continued in a raised voice, 'You know what is wrong with her. You heard me spell that out. Now, don't make a scene. Just get up.'

'I'm not going anywhere without my bride,' Shafat said without raising his voice. 'She is not to be blamed for what she has not done.'

With every word that Shafat Durrani spoke, the sinking hearts of Mirs and Mamoos stopped sinking any further. Shaheen, after having petrified Rizwan on the mud-wall, had run back to the bride's room without looking anybody in the eye. Her tears took a permanent shape in her eyes when she sat down with her back to the wall, knees bent, forehead resting over the bridge of her forearms. Her sobs could be heard down in the courtyard. However, the argument between Dr Durrani and Shafat did not allow her sobs to be audible in the tent-house.

When Dr Durrani, defeated and disobeyed, left the tent-house in a rage, he stopped at the entrance and turned to his son. 'Don't you dare come back to where I live?'

'Where would I take her then?'

'To hell,' Dr Durrani said and left.

There befell a silence of unimaginable depth. The hosts did not know how to react because the air had been turned uncertain and unpredictable by the confrontation between the father and the son. No one spoke. Not even the lone groom. The expectation and the dread made the air un-breathable.

Shaheen's sobs began to grow in intensity as the silence deepened. Then, it became the starting point for Shafat's contemplation. *"Who is crying?" He thought. "It could be my bride. But why would she weep when I have stayed for her? Maybe she doesn't know that. Perhaps she thinks I'm gone. How can I tell her?"*

The scandal ended before it was over because Boba came forward in the tent-house and kissed Shafat's forehead. 'I always thought that only an angel could marry our *Lal Ded*.'

The doom flowered into an unimaginable happiness. Mirs were always plagued by the notion that they had no idea what Shafat Durrani as a man was except that he was well-settled in America. For Dr Firdousa, it was the ultimate proof that Rukhsana would be happy to know what kind of an angel she has married. The happiness turned the events around so quickly and so drastically that Shaheen's sobs became an insignificant reality.

She became irrelevant in the events that followed. No one talked about her scandal because all the hosts and guests were overwhelmed by the humanity of Shafat Durrani. 'It's a good omen,' Raja Begum finally broke her silence. 'I would have understood this act if he had known the bride previously. But they are yet to meet. We all know what kind of pious girl our Rukhsana is, but the groom has no idea whom he married. That is why I say this is incredible. God bless you, Shafat Sahb. May you live a thousand years filled with happiness.'

When the bride was gone with her groom, the unexpected jubilation had died out, the guests had left and Mir Manzil gave the impression of an incredible loss; Shaheen cried steadily. She shattered her rows of glass bangles on the stacked *Wurusi* planks and cried. Then she pulled her hair out and tore her green iridescent dress. No one came to stop her because they knew that the two sisters loved one another beyond worldly measures.

Shaheen was thinking about the way she had treated Rizwan, her love. His last words were stabbing at her heart: 'I'll keep the wound of love open,' Rizwan had said in his emotionally choked voice. 'So that whenever they talk of love, my blood will ooze from the tender injury.' The amorous words slashed repeatedly at her heart and made her cry louder under the cover of Rukhsana's departure.

She could have handled it differently and averted the scandal. She failed to understand her own behaviour because all the while, she had been waiting for him, longing to see him, desperate to touch and feel him. But her anticipation was wronged when she saw him with that rough stubble on his ashen face. She could not resist holding the storm that arose from the depths of her past darkness. She dishonoured him. Called him a scoundrel. Labelled him as 'unacceptable'. A stalker. A waste. And then she added the final insult to his injuries and called him 'hateful'.

She cursed herself and banged her tired forearms on the stack of *Wurusi* planks once again so that now it was not the bangles that she intended to break but her tender bones. She wished that she had never called out for Chota Mamoo. Because when he came to the scene, the five friends ran away in fear of facing Kaka Towel.

Rizwan was left alone and helpless on the sagging base of Flame vine. His legs were on the inner side of the wall, and the shock had sapped his fever-strangulated strength. Chota Mamoo tried to pull him inside the courtyard when Badda Mamoo whispered in his ears, 'You don't pull the shame inside!'

Amid the flashing colourful lights, Chota Mamoo looked hard at Rizwan and recollected having seen him in Lal Chowk reading the scratched messages. He did not lose his cool; he grabbed Rizwan's legs and hurled him head-over-heels over the mud-wall. Rizwan fell with a loud thud in the surface drain.

'A chicken thief,' declared Badda Mamoo in an attempt to save the Mirs from disgrace. 'He had come to take our hens.'

Nobody believed it. Because everyone knew that there were six of them, all young, and everyone was also aware of Shaheen's nonconformist past. Mamoos' trick did not work. Dr Salah-ud-din Durrani was not impressed by the bombastic explanation. But Shafat Durrani took it in his stride and led the bride out of the house in absolute silence. When he had reached the decorated street door, he heard whispers coming from behind him.

'Where are you taking our friend,' asked Rukhsana's law-friends as the final, customary question before the departure.

He replied in his conventional American accent: 'From Downtown Srinagar to Downtown Denver.'

*

Commandant Krishnamurthy was the only one who came to commiserate mother and son. With him came his taciturn wife, Madam Suhasini, and an entourage of soldiers. All the neighbouring women looked from the chinks of their windows. It was a rarity. Soldiers in Kashmir were seen only as the cause of any condolence. It was the first time that they had come to express their condolences.

When they had bathed Mansoor Sir, covered him in a shroud tailored out of his own clothing, buried him in his own courtyard and raised a simple tombstone, mother and son had been left with nothing but a void that refused to be filled. Rizwan, contemplating the unadorned tombstone, understood that Mansoor's death did not arouse the neighbourhood. Their relatives did not come to commiserate.

Did it mean nothing to the society? Was no man dead? He was a teacher, after all. A teacher of some rapport. He must have taught some pupils. Even they did not turn up. Was his death so inconsequential? Would his own death, which he dreaded was not very far, be also inconsequential? He thought of his champion days, and a melancholic smile broke on his lips. *Anonymity!* Then he thought of Shaheen and closed his grief-stricken eyes.

He did not disclose his dread to Nishat Bibi. But kept his eyes open and directed at the street door to watch out for his own death, Kaka.

On the third day of the mourning, he remained seated near his father's grave with his eyes locked to the street door. Just after midday, when there was noise out in the street, his dread clumped at his throat as if he was strangulated by a wild animal. Then he heard the street door open a crack. His heart sank, and in his legs, he felt the immense weight of lead keeping him down. He gave into the terror and closed his eyes.

He opened his eyes when Commandant Krishnamurthy approached him at the street door. The extended set of epaulettes, medals and honours tingling on the left breast of his crisp uniform reflected the mid-day sun. He had to turn sideways to enter through the narrow side door. After him entered Madam Suhasini in her green sari with golden borders, followed by the entourage of plain soldiers.

The soldiers remained alert near the corners of the small courtyard. Their weapons ready and their eyes open. Commandant Krishnamurthy, calm and certain, sat in front of Rizwan. Madam Suhasini, quiet and agreeable, took Nishat Bibi's hand in her own hands but did not say a word. Nishat Bibi did not move her lips either. Nor did she cry. She kept her gaze on the courtyard all the while. But Commandant Krishnamurthy held Rizwan's hands firmly and told him in unequivocal terms that he was ready to do anything for him. 'If there is anything I could do for you,' he said in his soldier's voice, 'tell me without any hesitation.'

Rizwan hung his head.

That night, Rizwan dreamt that he was in his yellow, champion's uniform playing against Nasir-the-Ace, and about to lose the decider. But it was June, and the sun was atop the stadium roof, clearly visible through streaks of bird-shit smeared over the glass. When he looked down, they were playing basketball and he was up against a giant-looking Samir in his large black trousers. Samir's movements were large and eye-catching. Rizwan felt out of place because he did not know the moves of the game, so he asked the coach to intervene. He had his own basketball with him but he was out of the game.

'All games are owned by the players who play it,' the coach with dyed hair said. 'Those who don't play are played out.' Rizwan was even more confused by the answer because the large gathering of spectators was asking for his removal.

'Get him out of here… Get him out of here… Get him out of here…'

Rizwan tried to raise his voice but found it drowning in the roar of the spectators, and his dream suddenly ended because outside, the blaring sound of the mosque loudspeakers was at its peak.

People had begun their dawn fights for pitching their chants and singing the *Na'ats*. In the gathering, everyone was absorbed in the undulating currents of recitation of the words that they did not understand. But they went on screaming at the top of their lungs to rise above the effects of the sleep, which had been tormented by the dog barking all night. Nonetheless, they continued their groggy, gurgly and grouchy recitation, which had an echo of an ugly lament until the dawn had perished in the full glow of Monday morning.

Rizwan woke up to the reality that his father's death had uncovered for him. At once, he was overwhelmed by the uneasy notion of ending his own life.

Chapter Sixteen

Three days' mourning period was over. Life was so meaningless now. But the dread of being executed at the hands of Kaka began to take shape in Rizwan's mind. It summarily ousted the idea of suicide. It grew in his mind and made him restless.

He came out on the window and surveyed the road below. The cottony poplar-seeds were floating in the summer air. In the crisp sunshine of early morning, people were busy buying the essentials. Rizwan went downstairs and tried to eat his breakfast. His mouth felt dry like cotton, and the food tasted like sawdust. He got up without eating and went upstairs. There, in the room, he found Kaka's dread waiting for him - ready to devour him. He came down without thinking and went out.

He could not stay in the vicinity of Ashiyana, fearing that people might point at him when Kaka came. He wandered and found himself in the middle of Amira Kadal bridge, looking at a herd of sacrificial sheep. People were buying sheep for *Eid-ul-Azha*, barely two days away. The notion of *Eid* brought him no relief, and the restlessness continued to grow in him.

He walked from one end of the bridge to the other without finding any path for escape. He looked at the waters of Jhelum, puttering below the bridge. He contemplated hard but found it irrelevant to jump from the bridge. The idea had long died in the wake of his dread.

He looked at the herd of sheep being taken away by people with their hind legs raised in the hands of their new owners. One sheep, shrivelled up like a raisin, was sitting a short distance from the herd near the row of fisherwomen. No one looked at him. He was the oldest of them all and was known for having broken his teeth once in the rage of his youth while nibbling at the steel railing of an army camp. Now unable to chew the grass, he was drying up like a raisin. In the large, questioning eyes of the shrivelled up sheep the reflection of Kaka gave Rizwan a start. In terror, he looked behind his shoulder. People were busy with *Eid* shopping, and Kaka was not there.

He was at Mir Manzil, looking at the sacrificial sheep that Iqbal had brought for *Eid*. Raja Begum and Gopa were hennaing the just bathed animals. The sheep reminded Kaka that three days of Mansoor's mourning were over. He waited for Rukhsana to leave.

Rukhsana had come back the previous night to spend some time with her parents before leaving for Colorado.

Shaheen did not come down to greet her. Everybody understood her shame and did not force her until Raja Begum knocked at her door. 'If they hear that you died of starvation,' she warned Shaheen. 'They'll send her back from Umrika.'

Shaheen opened the door a little to accept the rice plate that Chota Mamoo had brought for her. But she refused to meet anyone. She did not open her mouth.

Her decision was irreversible.

Rukhsana seemed happy because of the way Shafat Durrani had handled the whole situation. 'It was how he thought about everybody,' she said, 'that they could not refuse his choice.' Chota Mamoo and all others were moved to tears, for they had never imagined a son -in-law of such pure heart.

Rukhsana left at ten in the morning. Kaka left immediately after her and went straight to Chinar Ghar to fetch his weapon. In the commotion caused by Rukhsana's sudden arrival at Mir Manzil, he had forgotten to take his gun with him. On the way, he met Rizwan face to face, who tried to hide. 'I'm coming back to kill you in your home,' Commander Kaka said without any pretence. In the haze of the joy of having seen off his happy niece, Commander Kaka did not realise that Rizwan was moving away from his home. Kaka walked away, singing to himself an old Hindi song:

'Apna pata miley na khabar yaar ki miley...
Dushman ko bhi na aisi saza pyaar ki miley...'

*

Shaheen, self-isolated in her room, was reminded of Rizwan when Kaka came to her door with the meals, singing the same song that he had when he saw Rizwan in the market. Over the past few days, anything that happened outside the walls of her room reminded Shaheen of Rizwan. Even the thumping of footsteps on the wooden staircase brought the images of Rizwan walking behind her, following her, and she, in her own way, took delight in each memory. It seemed an impossible recovery to her. Her mind grieved, but her heart was abundant with happy memories.

She came to realise that hope was another word for waiting; it did not change the circumstances. It was like the promise of someone dead. She ate after a gap of three days. She licked the plate clean but promised herself not to give in to anything to move out.

*

Kaka loaded his Chinese pistol with a new magazine. He slipped the weapon under his belt and sat on the porch with folded legs to tie the long, black laces of his white sneakers. He got up and raised his voice in the customary salutation of departure: ‘Boba. I’m leaving.’

Boba did not hear him and he did not wait for her reply either.

When he reached the square where he had killed Mansoor, the barber told him in a hushed voice: ‘He is not there.’

‘I can wait for him,’ Commander Kaka said calmly. He went inside Ashiyana, where an indifferent-looking Nishat Bibi asked him who he was. Commander Kaka looked at her and readily understood that she not only did not recognise him, but she had lost the relevance of time and space. She was wearing a woollen *Pherran* and the blank looks of dementia.

‘Don’t you recognise me?’ He asked her to confirm his observation.

‘Are you looking for Mansoor Sir?’ she said in reply. Commander Kaka nodded. ‘He is still at school,’ she said, looking in the direction of the sun. Then she put her left hand between the sun and her eyes. ‘Rizwan is in his room. Meet him.’

Kaka thought of the barber and took calculated steps in the corridor. He walked over the staircase without any hurry and opened the small door to his right. The bedding was ruffled in the room, and the smell confirmed that it had been slept in. But there was no one. He came out and walked into all the three rooms one by one and found nobody. He ran down the stairs and asked Nishat Bibi on the porch. ‘He is not there. Where is he?’

‘Where is who?’ She mirrored his question. ‘Rizwan? He must be at the stadium. You know he is a champion.’ Only then did Commander Kaka realise that the barber was right. Nishat Bibi had lost her reason.

He decided to wait for Rizwan on the porch but soon felt uncomfortable in the presence of an indifferent Nishat Bibi. He went out in the market and sat in the only barber chair in the shop. He looked in the mirror and brushed his beard. ‘Set it right,’ he told the barber.

*

‘You haven’t shaved for a long time,’ said Commandant Krishnamurthy. Coming to the Kashmir Indoor Stadium had not occurred to Rizwan at all. When he had looked into the sad eyes of the shrivelled up sheep and seen the reflection of Kaka, he realised that he was overthinking. It was then he decided to visit the *Charsis* in the Pratap Park.

He took drag after drag. And the *Charsi* with wet nostrils observed him with diligence. 'The gullies of love are always wet. One is bound to slip and fall face down.'

'He hasn't fallen,' interjected the one with cowboy's filthy hat. 'He has grown old.'

'You grow old only when you fall,' clarified Amjad, the heavyset one.

'Do you remember when you had fallen?' The one with the cowboy's hat asked.

'We fell together,' replied Amjad. '… for the same girl. Remember … marble-green eyes.'

There was a momentary silence. Then the other two said together, *'Tanga-ya-chot.'*

All the three *Charsis* burst into a hearty laughter. When they had regained their breathing, the one with the cowboy's hat motioned Rizwan to pass on the drag.

'Qahar...qahar,' the one with wet nostrils reminisced wishfully.

The more Rizwan smoked, the more apprehensive he became. His heart sank steadily until he lost all hope. The three *Charsis* left just before the hour of curfew. They got up one by one and left in silence, not realising in the darkness that Rizwan was still with them.

It was then that Rizwan decided to meet Commandant Krishnamurthy. On the way to the stadium, Rizwan was stopped by Gugga Gang - the renegades. They had just entered the premises of Srinagar to push their violent campaign. They checked his papers and asked him if he had come across any militants. 'No,' he said. And to their question of where he was going in the darkness of that early night; he told them that he was going to meet the Commandant in Kashmir Indoor Stadium because he knew him too well.

'What's the name of his wife?' One of the gang members asked to verify the correctness of Rizwan's claim.

'Madam Suhasini.'

*

The soldier-barber first trimmed Rizwan's hair and then shaved him clean under the yellow floodlights of the stadium, while Commandant Krishnamurthy studied him. 'This is how you face the challenges of life, Rizza Padukone?'

Rizwan let the razor pass his throat. He swallowed carefully. Then he answered out of necessity: 'No.'

Rizwan woke up in the middle of that early night and saw everything come to light under the yellow flood lights. He realised that the threat to his life was real, and he was doing nothing about it. He also realised that he could do nothing about it. The hard, steady looks of Commandant Krishnamurthy made him uncomfortable, and he asked for his leave. 'It is too dark now,' said Commandant Krishnamurthy, '...and already curfew.'

'Mother is alone.'

'Ok. My men will drop you.'

When the soldier's van reached the square, the boys hanging out in the square dispersed quickly, shouting: *'Gashti...Gashti...Gashti.'* The van stopped at the street door of Ashiyana, and those who could see watched Rizwan alight from the van and go inside.

These were the boys who had been instructed by Commander Kaka to inform him when Rizwan returned. They had said 'yes' to him but had decided to warn Rizwan instead that Kaka Towel was looking for him. But when they saw him alight from the soldier's van, they decided against their plan and went to Chinar Ghar to inform Kaka Towel that Rizwan was home. In fact, they waited for the van to leave so as to be sure that Rizwan was still home and had not gone with the soldiers.

Commander Kaka left Chinar Ghar only after the roles of recruits had been assigned. General Sikandar praised the experience that he had gained in the very short period of his militancy career. 'Here he is,' declared General Sikandar. 'My younger brother in age but my elder brother in *Jihad*.'

It was a large gathering. Men and boys who had joined Al-Chinar Mujahideen turned out to be the ones who had lost their father or son or brother in the Gaw Kadal massacre, Chota Bazaar massacre, Kunan-poshpora massacre, the numerous crackdowns, unaccounted-for disappearances and during all those operations which had no conceivable names. Sons, brothers and fathers of the women who were raped either in isolation or en masse were the most outrageous ones and were ready to blow themselves up for the liberation of Kashmir.

Commander Kaka had to stop the meeting for a short period to accommodate the news that his boys brought from Peer Wari. He thanked them and waited for the meeting to conclude.

Despite the curfew, he left early because he followed General Sikandar's all-time applicable advice: *'earlier the better'*. But he had not counted on the street door of Ashiyana to be locked. So, when he pushed the door, his entire body was jarred with a loud bang.

Rizwan, in his room, was alarmed and looked out from the window. Below, near the street door, Kaka Towel was climbing the mud-wall to get in. Rizwan froze in his place. He watched Kaka jump in and saw in the twilight of the moon the little Chinese pistol bob under Kaka's belt.

Rizwan did not wait any further and decided to run away. The corridor door was locked, and Ammi was in her room. He still had time. In the expanse of that critical moment, Rizwan realised that no moment in his entire life had been so decisive. Once again, he was attracted to appreciate the vastness that lay within a moment. But these were other times and needed to be dealt with differently.

He gave a long, last look to the space where he used to sit down after midnight in an attempt to realise the truth. He took a deep breath, jumped through the window and landed on the tin roof of the courtyard washroom. He fell with a huge bang. When he recovered, he jumped over the mud-wall and disappeared into the labyrinth of the night.

Commander Kaka, on the porch, heard the loud bang and, instead of going in the house, followed his instinct, went towards the washroom and got lost in the labyrinth of the night.

The city of Srinagar slept in deep silence and was possessed by carelessness. But Commander Kaka did not give up and searched for Rizwan in the most unthought-of of places. He searched in the mosques, the Dastgir Sahb shrine, the leper colony and the slums of migrant labourers.

And everywhere he went, people welcomed him and told him where Rizwan could possibly have gone. They gave him a hero's welcome who was in pursuit of their most dreaded enemy - a renegade. He followed their half-sleepy instructions all night, traversed in the labyrinth of knotty by-lanes and at the crack of dawn when the loudspeakers called out the day's first *Azan*, he found himself at the street door of Ashiyana.

*

Rizwan was hiding atop Kastoor Pend overlooking the city of Srinagar. All night, he had the feeling that Kaka Towel was looking for him. He felt his shadow wherever he went. He tried to locate him in the dark mantle that lay over the city of Srinagar. He failed to point the trail of his pursuer because the knotty by-lanes were too narrow to be visible from the top.

"Somewhere there," he thought to himself with a comforting sigh, "... Shaheen must be sleeping her angelic sleep, under the pink-and-red tiled ceiling."

*

Desperate for sleep but not sleepy, Shaheen was awake, thinking of sunshine in Colorado. She was invaded once again by a phantasmagorial noisy mob in her head. Her insomnia had worsened, and she remembered not having slept from the night she scolded Rizwan on the mud-wall. *'I'll keep the wound of love open,'* his emotionally choked voice outplayed the noisy mob in her head. *'So that whenever they talk of love, my blood will ooze from the tender injury.'*

Moments later, she heard a cry in her head. 'Do you love me…? Do you love me…?' It was Rizwan in her short dream.

Her eyes opened again. It was still dark, and her feet were cold. She pulled up the quilt over her head and slipped in. The dread of insomnia was there, waiting to torment her. She threw the quilt back over the bed but kept her feet under it. She longed for the loudspeakers to dull the noisy crowd in her head. But it was still midnight, and she heard the clock ring two in the *Baithak* below. The night was dragging on. She thought of writing a letter to Bublee and telling her what had happened to the love that she was so fond of. But she had no address to write to.

She went down to the courtyard and looked up at the sky. The moving moon was eight days old, but the ageless stars were fixed in their place in the dark sky. She wished for a shooting star to pass by and listen to her wish, but no star was ready to drop for her. She dropped her shalwars, sat on her haunches and urinated abundantly near the mud-wall where she had cursed Rizwan.

'He who has ruined my name,' she remembered having cursed him when all the guests had gathered around Rizwan, '… may he ruin like an outcast.'

Now, liberated from the discomfort of a full bladder, her temper calmed. She repented all her rancour towards Rizwan. *"Poor fellow," she thought of him with a strong craving. "God knows what he is doing in my absence."*

*

At the crack of dawn, when the devotees started pouring into Makhdoom Sahb, Rizwan sneezed. When he had recovered, he saw people huddle together and whisper to one another. 'A renegade named Rizwan is roaming in the city. He has become the right-hand man of Commandant Krishnamurthy. *Allah* has blackened his treacherous face, and he walks on all fours like an animal. Kaka Towel is going to hunt him down. *Insha Allah.*'

Then one of them raised his arm and shouted: 'Death to renegades.'

And the rest answered with an equally loud shout: 'Death to Rizwan.'

The flame in Rizwan's night-long vigilant eyes died a sudden death. Dregs of Shaheen's thoughts dispersed in the cold air of the blue dawn. He was ashen and terrified. His cold body trembled with a clutter of his stiff bones.

He decided not to stay for *Fajr* prayers. Without waiting for a moment, he quickly descended the one hundred and one steps hewed in stone. With his head down, incognito, he crossed the Nowhatta Chowk and disappeared in the knotty by-lanes of the interior city, which, moments earlier, were invisible from the Kastoor Pend.

On his way, breathless and petrified, he was reminded of his favourite quote of Samir: *'Your understanding of the other is another way of understanding the self.'* Despite the insight, all the alleys seemed to have a dead-end because he had nowhere to go. There wasn't a single gully that was not full of enlivened people roaming about in anticipation of his death.

Women distributed *Tehri* to the passers-by as a sign of dominance of good over evil. He was lured by the hunger and took a handful of *Tehri* in the cup of his hands. But unlike others did not stop to eat it. He ate it while walking briskly. Wherever he went, the thirst for his blood was palpable. There was no place to hide and no scope for lament. He was trapped. But *Tehri* gave him warmth and raised his spirits.

Chapter Seventeen

'Hope is not a tactic,' Commandant Krishnamurthy said in reply to Rizwan's hope for his condition to get better. 'It's a word. A dead soldier's word. You need tactics, Rizwan. Not words.'

'It is not possible for me to go back to my life anymore,' Rizwan said in defence of his tactlessness.

'Change your circumstances and reclaim your life.'

Rizwan did not understand, so Commandant Krishnamurthy had to explain to him word by detailed word until he brought home all that Rizwan needed to understand about dealing with Kaka Towel. Krishnamurthy found him a quick learner but slow in understanding the mechanics of warfare. 'You think like a poet,' he said.

'Love has done that to me,' Rizwan said unwittingly.

'What else has love done to you?'

'It opened up my closed dreams.'

Krishnamurthy began to smile to himself. He waited before saying what he thought at that moment. 'You can't go back to your love, either. Can you?'

Rizwan nodded. A lump was forming in his throat which he tried to swallow.

'You can reclaim your love, too. Did you know that?'

'It is for love to reclaim me,' Rizwan said with a long sigh. 'I can only reclaim my wretched life.'

Rizwan remembered his last day in the unoccupied stadium. It was a cloudy August day of the year 1988. He had looked several times over his head to see if the glass roof was wet with rain. The Championship started next week, and rain could mean the closure of the National Highway. They would have to wait till the Highway opened for all the players to come to Kashmir Indoor Stadium for participation. It was a prerequisite for the Championship to take off only when participants from all the regions had reported.

It did not rain that day. The clouds remained unyielding in the sky. Their preparations for the Senior Championship were in the final stages when the news broke out that General Zia had been killed in a plane crash. The city of Srinagar yielded like a ripe wart: bomb blasts, protest marches and arson.

First came the terrified parents to take their kids who were preparing for the Junior Championship. The older ones stayed to practice a little longer, hoping that by evening, the situation would improve. Barely an hour had passed when the Police came and drew them out of the stadium. There was no violence as the operation turned out to be a precautionary one - for the safety of the players.

Two days later, when they came back to resume their preparation, the players found the stadium occupied. Soldiers, donning white undershirts and khaki trousers, were raising bunkers out of the earthbags. Three soldiers in full battle gear were guarding them. When Rizwan tried to go inside, they stopped him:

'Where?' one of them asked. 'Nobody is allowed inside.'

'This is my stadium,' Rizwan asserted. 'I play here.' He tried to go ahead.

The other two soldiers stopped him, looked hard at him and then kicked him on his buttocks. Rizwan fell to the ground. When he tried to get up, a soldier aimed his rifle right in his mouth: 'If you are spotted around here again,' he said with his jaws held tight, 'I'll have you buried right here…in your stadium.'

That night, Rizwan could not sleep because he was confronted by the barrel of a gun whenever he closed his eyes. For weeks, he was tormented by the way soldiers had looked at him with the barrel of the gun between his teeth. It was only after he had met Samir that he could overcome his phobia of sleeping. Now he was there, inside the stadium, with his eyes wide open - not at the mercy of a gun barrel - but face to face with the man in charge, and at his command.

'The good thing about all this is,' reassured Commandant Krishnamurthy, '…that you'll be celebrating *Eid* with us.'

*

First came the Electricity-man. He said salutations loudly. Dr Firdousa came out on the porch and handed him his *Eidi*. Raja Begum also came out and gave him additional *Eidi*. 'This is for Rukhsana's happiness.'

Shaheen had been up long before the first *Azan* of the day was called out. She woke up with the two sheep tied in the courtyard when they bleated for the first time on the last day of their sheep-lives. She heard her mother give away the *Eidi*. She stayed in her position of absolute resignation, her back to the wall, knees bent, forehead resting over the bridge of her forearms.

Then came the Water-man. And immediately after him came the Postman. Raja Begum gave him *Eidi* after Dr Firdousa had handed over hers, followed by the recurrent phrase: 'This is for Rukhsana's happiness.'

'Take it,' Dr Firdousa said to the Postman when the Water-man had left. He took the hundred-rupee note and, in return, handed her a rumpled envelope.

'You take it,' he said.

'What is this,' Dr Firdousa was surprised. Raja Begum came close to her and looked at her, astonished.

'A letter for Shaheen Iqbal,' said the Postman.

'Is it from Rukhsana?' Raja Begum asked.

'From Jammu.'

Shaheen was alerted. She lifted her head from the support of her forearms and, for the first time since Rukhsana's departure, turned around to face the sun coming through the open window. 'Bublee,' she whispered to the shafts of the sunlight that lit her pitiful room.

It was a long letter, written in long hand on both sides of the A-4 size sheet. The paper was crumpled, and the letter had the unmistakable signs of having been written with sweaty hands. It smelled of hardened perspiration and abandonment. The writing was unsteady because of the unlevelled support it was written on. The ink had just been barely enough to finish the letter because, towards the end, the writing had faded.

Nevertheless, Bublee was happy with the fact that she could, after all that had happened to them, connect with Shaheen once again. Among other details of the Migrant Camp in Jammu, which were heart-wrenching and unbelievable, she said that her brother, Samir Pandita, a shy and taciturn monk, had to bathe in the open. She and her mother bathed at midnight when there was no moon.

In the postscript, she asked Shaheen: 'How is he?' She, too, had desisted from giving name to the acts that couldn't be disclosed. The writing at that stage of the letter was so faded that Shaheen had to read it by instinct rather than the eye. *"Thank God I'm privy to my own affairs," she thought … and laughed at the cruelty of her fate. "Otherwise, it would have been impossible for me to know what she had intended to write."*

She read the postscript over and over again because it was the major part of the letter. She realised that the writing had not faded on account of the receding ink but because of the growing spread of teardrops.

Her heart ached, and tears streamed down her cheeks. It was then that she felt relieved, and her spirits were elevated. She sat down once again against the wall and wrote an equally long and harrowing letter to Bublee.

While she wrote the detailed account of her devastated love, the butcher had first of the two sheep slaughtered in the courtyard with a raised proclamation: *Bismillah-i-Allah-o-Akbar*. It was at the hands of Raja Begum. Then came Iqbal's turn. Shaheen sealed the letter with her spit.

In the following letter, Bublee wrote, among other things, that they were relieved to have received a table fan in charity. The atmosphere in their suffocating tent-house had changed. 'Now the reeking hot air is no longer stagnant,' she wrote. '... it blows on our miserable faces.'

In her letter, Bublee urged Shaheen to meet Rizwan, to forget all her naive grudges, begged her not to lose the kind of luxury that love had offered her, and assured her that love alone was enough to salvage a soul in torment. 'You never know when the uncertain tide of fortune turns.'

In the postscript, she had written that her mother, Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita, was trying to get a job in New Delhi. Bublee wanted Shaheen to pray for her.

Shaheen was shaken to the core because the contents of the letter rang true to her. She understood the meaning of what Bublee was referring to. It was true that she had been devastated ever since she had driven Rizwan away. Now, her camaraderie with Bublee was at the mercy of Postman and the state of the National Highway. Although Shaheen had decided to cage herself in her opprobrium, the writing proved too influential. She could no longer wait and hope for Rizwan to come to her.

She went out immediately. It was three o'clock, and she knew where to find him.

*

'So, you'll help me?' Rizwan asked.

'Of course,' replied Commandant Krishnamurthy with a big smile. 'If you first agree to play a game with me.'

'Badminton requires physical stamina and willpower,' said Rizwan. 'And as of now, I possess none.'

'You don't find things like these,' said the Commandant, '…until you need them.'

'In that case,' Rizwan said after a thoughtful pause, 'I'll need to practice a little with one of your men.'

Rizwan practised with a soldier, a Major named Sohrab, until he was warmed enough to stretch his body to limits.

Commandant Krishnamurthy, after having brought Madam Suhasini to the court, turned to Rizwan. 'That's it, Rizza Padukone,' he said. He motioned Major Sohrab to go. 'If you practice too much…I'll be at a loss.'

Major Sohrab brought a wooden chair for Madam Suhasini and left. 'Don't go, Major,' Commandant Krishnamurthy shouted at him again. 'Be our referee.'

Major Sohrab gathered himself in the position of attention with a soldier's salute. 'Yes, sir. Sir.'

Commandant Krishnamurthy tied the arms of his spectacles with an elastic band that Madam Suhasini handed him. 'I had forgotten that I'm an old man now,' Commandant Krishnamurthy chuckled.

The game they played was one of the best that Rizwan could ever remember because even with his short breath and stiff limbs, he managed to beat the tactful Commandant in the first game. He was about to win the second game, and the match as well when he realised that the Commandant had brought over his taciturn wife only to see himself win. Without letting any of the spouses know about his intentions, he reduced the power of his smashes so that the Commandant could not only have enough time to return his shots easily but could place them as per his own will.

The Commandant won the second game.

Madam Suhasini was elated and ordered tea.

They sipped tea while Rizwan contemplated the fate of the match. He needed the Commandant in his best spirits. So, he decided to let him win only when it seemed most improbable, to intensify the kick. The last game lasted for two hours. Eventually, Rizwan did not lose on purpose but because of his failing stamina.

'You lure him into the market…' Commandant Krishnamurthy stated the plan. He brushed his sweat with a large military towel. He was in great spirits and asked for a separate towel for Rizwan. He also got him a soft drink bottle because Rizwan was still panting.

Rizwan knew that he was the most hated man in the city of Srinagar and could not risk venturing into the knotty bylanes of the interior city. 'Everybody in those lanes is loyal to him,' he said while slurping loudly. 'It's too risky.'

'He shoots with a pistol. Doesn't he?' Commandant Krishnamurthy assured him. 'He'll have to come close to you to shoot you.'

'So?'

'I'll be around in civilian clothes. Why should you worry? His Chinese pistol cannot pierce our Rudraksha life-vest. Besides, you can run. You are a fit man. You are an athlete, Rizwan!'

When Commandant Krishnamurthy finished speaking his words, the camp's barren silence came crowding over Rizwan. He saw his father collapsing in the Chowk. Then he thought of his mother vegetating at home. The silence around him deepened, and he could hear the buzzing of his own soul. 'What if we have to shoot him?'

'Then we shoot him,' replied Commandant Krishnamurthy. 'Dead or alive, we'll get him. But I'd prefer to get him alive!' He asked Major Sohrab to bring some hand-held weapons. 'This is a pistol,' he said to Rizwan, holding a .380 ACP. 'Major will show you what else he has. You are a quick learner. Poet!'

*

Commander Kaka could no longer go out and find Shaheen. It was too dangerous for him to leave his area. Now, it was common knowledge that Rizwan had teamed up with Commandant Krishnamurthy to avenge his father's death.

'We can't sit like this,' General Sikandar said in anger because Raja Begum had come to Chinar Ghar seeking their help, '...while our honour is roaming on the roads.'

Neelam Khanum had already made plans. She had taken Shaheen's photograph from the glass frame and handed it to General Sikandar. 'Send your men to fetch her.'

'Wonderful idea,' said Commander Kaka. He swung two of his men in action, instructed them to leave their weapons behind and handed the photograph to them. 'Remember,' he warned them, '…she is my daughter. My piece-of-liver. My soul resides in her.'

'She is so graceful, Commander Sahb,' said one of the two men looking at the picture.

Commander Kaka smiled. When the duo was near the street door, he was reminded of Rizwan. He called them back and whispered in their ear without mentioning anyone in particular. 'If she is accompanied by her friend, bring her over as well.'

*

Shaheen did not find Rizwan near the college gate. The college girls, on seeing her, ran away, which she could not understand. She followed Rizwan's footsteps, knowing his route by heart. She went to the footpath market running along the Information Building and pretended to look at the roadside stalls selling cheap sunglasses and wall decorations. The vendors shooed her away. Anyone she came close to ran away from her. She did not realise it until she looked in the tall glasses of the shop-front of Kashmir Shoes.

She was in shabby clothes; her long, stiff hair was deranged like a madwoman's, and her feet were black and bare. In her heart, she was reminded of her childhood days in the streets of Ratta Latta.

She waited away from the vendors as the girls passed by her. Then she went inside the Pratap Park and looked around the seven sad fountains. She passed the ring of *Charsis* in the corner under the octopus Chinar, taking drags in turns. They took pity on her and offered her two bananas. She looked away and left on the other side of the park and walked back over the M.A. Road until she was at the open gate of the Girl's College again. She then turned around near the Bike-Market and came back on the Residency Road.

Then, it occurred to her that he might have left a message on the brick wall island. She ran to the last wall she remembered having scratched on. There it was, just a small line that was deeper than the rest of the scratching: '*Love lasts forever*'. Perhaps he had been scratching it daily, over and over again, because he was getting no replies. Without waiting for any moment, she took off her hairpin and scratched underneath the small line: '*Love and mummies*'.

*

Rizwan, seated in the green metallic chair, contemplating the events in his head, felt a sudden, inexplicable scratching across his heart. The pain brought a bitter taste to his mouth. Initially, he thought about the soft drink. He checked the bottle for the expiry date. But then, he could not contain the fluttering of his heart. 'Shaheen,' he whispered to the cool shadow of the colossal Chinar. 'You are there!'

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He found the reply to his love's longevity on the brick-wall island: 'Love and mummies.' She had come. The scratches were fresh, and the heavy scent of stagnant waters lingered on in the air. He sniffed like a dog and followed the scent that led him to Ghanta Ghar. The three o'clock rush was growing, and the scent lost its distinctness in the perfumed crowd. He faced a cobbler brushing the military shoes of a tall soldier. The scent ended there.

*

The two unarmed militants started their search from the gate of Girl's College, roamed all around Lal Chowk, from Bombay Dyeing showroom to the roundabout of Jahangir Chowk, but found no girl that could remotely resemble the photograph they had been given. 'But there was a madwoman, barefoot and deranged, donning a milky-white kameez-shalwar,' reported the Elder militant. 'She had the same devil-like eyes,'

'Where did you see her?' Dr Firdousa asked as she alighted from the mini-ambulance that she had travelled back in haste.

'Near Ghanta Ghar,' said the Elder militant.

'Was she alone?'

'Yes. In fact, some street kids were teasing her.'

Dr Firdousa asked them to get in the ambulance, clambered on the front seat, and asked the driver to move to Lal Chowk.

*

Rizwan saw her cheeks burning red with the embers of love. She was in tatters, facing the Ghanta

Ghar, waiting… perhaps for him, he hoped! He did not dare approach her. She was barefoot, and her face was full of smouldering rage.

It was she, who after singling him out in the three o'clock rush, walked towards him and looked straight into his sad eyes. 'How much did you miss me?' She asked.

Rizwan could not answer because the lump that he had swallowed in the stadium popped up again in his throat. It seemed to be there permanently. There was no way Rizwan could speak. A tear ran down his left cheek. Shaheen hurried and caught the teardrop on her sweaty hand that had heart-shaped fingernails smeared with dirt. She looked into his eyes while the crowd passed by them like the dregs of a dying dream.

'Man hasn't invented a torture that could equal love in suffering,' she said while brushing his wet cheek.

Rizwan replied in a weak voice: 'Separation.'

Chapter Eighteen

Commander Kaka could not stomach the fact that they had seen Rizwan and not brought him over.

'We had no weapons,' protested the Elder militant.

'I told you to keep your weapons here so that you could move freely. But you were two... and he was one. Do you get me? That's why I sent you both,' he shouted. 'Idiots! I had told you.'

'We thought...' the Elder militant said hesitantly, '...you had said about a female friend.'

Commander Kaka was enraged with the subtle affront, and grew fidgety. He felt grossly disrespected and, without thinking, took out his Chinese pistol and aimed at the Elder militant's bandaged left ear and stopped.

'We had Shaheen to control,' they said together, explaining the injury.

Only then did Commander Kaka understand their pitiful position, and decided not to shoot them. 'Even all warm-blooded men of Kashmir, put together, aren't enough to control her,' he conceded and shot in the air. The gun did not fire. He pulled the trigger once more, and bang; a bullet went up, and the pigeons of the entire neighbourhood flew in terror. When the echo of the flapping wings had died, and the shooting had moderated his temper, Kaka reflected. 'Did he sound menacing?'

'He looked miserable,' said the Elder militant.

*

He was right. Rizwan's cheeks were still wet when the mini-ambulance stopped with a screech near the Ghanta Ghar. Two menacing men rushed out of the vehicle and pounced on him. Rizwan did not react. He was like dead meat. Shaheen, lost in the despair of her love, was confused.

The two lovers had decided to eat the roadside *Wazwan* because Shaheen was hungry, had not eaten for days together and was showing unmistakable signs of fainting. They had been walking over the Bund, hand-in-hand like Dr Firdousa and Dr Nizam in earlier days, but without the protective cover of the blond foreigners. But they did not care.

Unlike her mother, Shaheen displayed the virtue of courage and agreed to Rizwan's plan of leaving the valley the same evening. Rizwan was relieved that he didn't have to be a part of Commandant Krishnamurthy's violent adventure, even if it meant not seeing him at all before the departure. He was content that he had his love.

'Everyone here … is an enemy of love,' he said.

She was looking at an old man carrying a bucketful of water over the inclined plank-bridge between the river bank and the Houseboat. 'Perhaps for a guest,' she said, mixing her thoughts with the world around her.

'No,' Rizwan replied in confusion. 'For everybody.'

Shaheen did not try to correct him because she felt too weak to argue. 'I'm so terrified,' she said weakly.

Rizwan looked at her parched lips and brushed the red embers on her face with the fingers of his right hand. He motioned her to sit on the concrete parapet of the Bund. They sat there and looked leisurely at the puttering Jhelum. In the distance, labourers donning yellow helmets were drilling pile-holes for a pier.

'I have a friend in Jammu,' she said. 'We can go to her.' Then she was overcome by fatigue, but this time, she persevered in her efforts. 'But I won't go there barefoot, Rizwan,' she managed to say with a feeble laugh.

'You don't look well,' Rizwan said sadly.

'You think you do?'

For a while, they looked at each other in silence. Shaheen sank steadily in herself.

'All is well when love is unharmed,' Rizwan said to raise her spirits.

'Your love will always be unharmed in my heart,' Shaheen said without taking her eyes off him.

'But the city is up in arms against us.'

'You know, the city doesn't bother me.'

'What bothers you, Shaheen?'

'Never say again about keeping that wound of love open. It harasses me. Have I not healed you?'

Once again, they looked at each other without speaking for a while. 'Show me your tender injury, Rizwan. I will nurse it with my love.'

'We are in Kashmir. They won't let us do it, Shaheen,' he said thoughtfully. 'Let's run away right now.'

'She might be in Delhi if her mother had gotten the job she was looking for,' she said in her faint voice.

'Who … Who will be in Delhi?'

'Bublee,' she replied.

Only then did Rizwan recollect the fundamental bridge of their tremendous love, and they talked about her for long, until Shaheen could no longer speak. She got up and started walking.

When they reached the Tailor's Market, Shaheen felt that her legs were behaving like noodles, and her eyes were seeing an unfathomable darkness. 'I'm losing control over myself,' she said in her failing voice.

Then they decided to eat something before getting her a pair of shoes. But whatever Rizwan proposed to eat, she felt no hunger for that thing. Then he told her to come with him and took her to the line of *Rista* vendors behind the Ghanta Ghar. There, she could not say 'no' to the smell of fresh coriander. They sat on their haunches around the vendor, waiting for the *Rista-pot* to boil.

A cold gust of wind blew from the west, indicating a fresh snowfall in the Gulmarg Mountains. Shaheen huddled closer to the kerosene stove on which the *Rista - pot* was about to boil. The vendor gave them one *half-lavasa* each so as to give them the feel of eating.

'I want to eat an apple,' Shaheen said, looking at the fluffy *half-lavasa*.

‘We don’t have apples in June,’ Rizwan said in reply. He was absorbed in her dry, flaky lips. He felt another tear slip over his right cheek. Shaheen did not stop looking at him, asking him for the apple with her eyes. ‘I wish it were in my hands,’ he added.

‘What do we have in June?’ She asked, her face burning with red embers of love. ‘What do we have in June, Rizwan?’

Rizwan did not say anything until his thought broke into a smile. *‘Rista,’* he said.

‘But I want to eat an apple,’ she demanded and smiled sadly.

She saw the vendor pour boiling red *Rista-soup* and two *Ristas* into one steel bowl and was about to hand that to Rizwan when the two menacing men pounced on him. The steel *Rista* bowl was hurtled away, rolled on the footpath and fell over in the gutter near the Booksellers. Two *Ristas* rolled further and stopped in front of the pharmacy shops near the Palladium Cinema. Shaheen was still drowsy and took her time to come to terms with the situation.

The two men picked up Rizwan and hurled him against the shutter of a closed shopfront, like an apple sack. He struck the flexible steel barrier with a bang, which alerted the soldiers near the earth-bag bunker.

Dr Firdousa, a black stethoscope coiled around her neck, coming from the Emporium side stopped the soldiers with her outstretched arm: ‘Family matter,’ she said with authority.

The soldiers stopped in their step and asked: ‘Need help?'

Dr Firdousa said 'no' and asked the two men to pick up Shaheen instead. 'He is not our concern,' she commanded.

The duo was reminded of Commander Kaka's warning and did not dare approach Shaheen. They asked her to come with them by tapping on her arm. By that time, Shaheen had realised what was happening and was trying to lift bruised Rizwan from the footpath. When the Elder militant pulled at her arm, she turned around and, without saying a word, bit off his right earlobe.

*

When Rizwan recovered, he found himself on the footpath, facing a relaxed *Rista* vendor. His left foot was hurting. His vision was shaking. He was completely disoriented. His head had struck the shutter first but he had his memories intact. He remembered being happy and then flying in the air. He wanted to go back to that moment of joy, but something was amiss. He was grounded. Despite a ringing in his head and moving on all four, he began to look for Shaheen, the cornerstone of his memory.

'They took her,' the *Rista* vendor clarified, '…in the ambulance. They also paid me for the *Rista* plate,' he continued. 'You are free to go.'

Rizwan got up and looked around. The world looked unreal to him. He thought about Shaheen and her flaky lips. The heartfelt demand for an apple broached at his miserable heart. *'I truly wish that it was in my hands, Shaheen.'* He closed his eyes in yet another surrender to his whimsical fate, and started off limping over the footpath in front of the Booksellers. The three o'clock rush around Ghanta Ghar was ebbing and, with it, sunk the hopes of his escape.

The illusory thought of being with Shaheen for the rest of his life pained him. The short burst of happiness ended too quickly. Once again, he hit the bottom of his despair. He limped in front of the pharmacy shops and steadily crossed the bunkered Palladium Cinema. He passed through the narrow, knotty Koker Bazar lanes, barely managed his movement between the clutter of hand carts and utterly constrained, headed for the stadium.

*

Rizwan remembered Gugga, a well-known marriage-dancer once, now a dreaded renegade. He was talking to Commandant Krishnamurthy in the arena. Both were seated on metallic chairs. In his prime, he used to dance in a woman's costume with painted lips and fake hair. Now, he had a brigade of his own, fighting the militants and collaterally helping the soldiers.

'For you, this will open up the window to Srinagar,' said Commandant Krishnamurthy. 'The window that you are ready to die for.'

'The window that incited the whole counter-movement,' replied Gugga. 'How can I forget that night.'

'Whatever happens, we must eliminate the entire Al-Chinar in one go.'

'My boys will give them no chance to escape or recover,' said Gugga. 'Take my word.'

'Remember, what happens in Ratta Latta,' continued Commandant Krishnamurthy, '…will become the model for how you can win the city of Srinagar.'

'We will break their bones and ride over their corpses,' said an inspired Gugga.

'What happened to your leg?' Commandant Krishnamurthy turned to Rizwan as he came limping towards him.

'It's my foot,' Rizwan replied. 'I hurt it.'

'Shuttlecock khatam shud?' growled Gugga.

'Why?' A surprised Commandant Krishnamurthy asked.

'Our main dancer has broken his foot,' Gugga replied, and laughed uncontrollably.

Commandant Krishnamurthy restrained himself. 'It's not much,' he asked Rizwan. 'Is it?'

'Just a sprain,' Rizwan replied and looked at Gugga, still laughing under the influence of his self-joke.

'He is the in-charge of 'Operation Shuttlecock',' Commandant Krishnamurthy said, indicating to laughing Gugga. 'Be ready for tomorrow morning.'

*

'Shoot at sight,' Commander Kaka gave orders to his boys. They had gathered in the courtyard of the Chinar Ghar. Boys squatted on their haunches under the filigree of tree branches and moonlight. On the numerous, juicy branches clung tiny, green apples like pimples of an impossible dream.

They listened to their brave commander's every word. 'But spare this man.' He held a searchlight against the photograph of a tall and athletic-looking Rizwan in a yellow T-shirt and shorts holding a white badminton racket in hand, feet completely off the ground. 'Leave him for me. And don't forget that.'

Commander Kaka's feeling of invincibility - since all his victims till then had been helpless and armless - was not very invincible any more. Doubts had been creeping in his mind since he learnt that Rizwan had joined hands with Commandant Krishnamurthy. Deep in his heart, he wished that it was a false instinct. But the more he thought about it, the more convincing the feeling rang.

'How do we know that Commandant Krishnamurthy will come here?' The Elder militant asked. 'No one dares step foot inside Ratta Latta.'

Commander Kaka was not ready to face his dread in front of his own boys. He knew that soldiers would not submit to him like his victims. There was going to be a fight. He had never thought about his death before.

'Because Commander Kaka says so,' intervened General Sikandar. He had just returned from his latest tour of the southern valleys, gathering boys to fight the Indian might. 'He has the instinct of a free wolf.'

Although he was exhausted to the point of falling, General Sikandar gave a detailed sermon to raise the morale of his boys. His words, which lacked common sense, made their blood boil so much that they wanted to fight that very moment. It was midnight and General Sikandar asked Commander Kaka if 'they' would raid during the night.

'It is possible,' he said in reply. 'If I were the Commandant, I'd raid in the night… to catch the enemy off-guard.'

'You can't catch an enemy off-guard,' replied the Elder militant, 'when they know your plans.'

'That's absolutely right,' said General Sikandar, to the sheer delight of the boys.

'Go. Sleep as usual,' Commander Kaka said without smiling. 'I'll see you ready at dawn.'

They did not sleep at all. The Elder militant, knowing that Commander Kaka had seen off the most dangerous crackdowns, raids and identification parades, was going to live out this raid, too. Believing in their eventual victory, he began to plan accordingly. He asked half of his boys to prepare the list of their arms and ammunition, while the other half were asked to prepare the people of the entire Ratta Latta for the upcoming raid.

'Not a single window shall be without a gun,' he instructed them. 'All doors shall be barred, and all the men shall be ready to die. Ratta Latta's honour is at stake.'

'Indian dogs,' shouted a very young boy in the gathering, his two hands making an oval shell around his mouth.

All else yelled with raised fists: 'Go back.'

The sharp, moon-lit night shook with a tremor.

General Sikandar did not give in to the lamentations of his wife, Neelam Khanum that he was exhausted, drained from being out there for weeks together, still carried the dust of the distant villages, not the only one to take pains in the matters of the freedom movement, and needed to take rest. He hurled the green quilt over the bed, got up, donned his black *Pherran* and accompanied the Elder militant to wake up the residents of Ratta Latta. 'Ask all others to make the inventory quickly and then go to sleep,' he commanded. 'They have a long day ahead tomorrow.'

First, they met the Mohalla Intizamia Committee Chairman, Haji Abdul Wahid Darvesh, at his residence. He readily agreed to announce the preparations on the mosque loudspeaker. 'It's exactly the opposite that we must do,' explained General Sikandar. 'We need no one to have the notion that anyone else knows about the raid so that when they raid, everyone is prepared in a manner as if he is the only one to defend Ratta Latta.' He went on to throw light on the preparedness of the individual. 'This is how Guerrilla war-fare becomes successful. Individuals need to operate like institutions.'

From there onwards, Haji Abdul Wahid Darvesh woke up every individual house-owner and let General Sikandar explain to him his significance. 'You are the one we have pinned our hopes on,' General Sikandar reiterated. 'Don't let Ratta Latta down.'

In the twilight of that moonlit night, General Sikandar saw the pride welling up inside the residents of his neighbourhood. He was so moved by their response that when he was finished with the preparations, he went straight to Neelam Khanum to mend her bitterness.

*

Gugga refused to take sniffer dogs with him. 'We got a bait,' he said to conclude his meeting with Commandant Krishnamurthy. 'He will have to come to us…come what may.'

Although it was the third week of June, his breath was visible while he talked. July diminished the difference between day and night temperatures. But June, as always, had one leg in the radical shoes of spring. The cold dawn was about to crack.

Contrary to Rizwan's expectation, the Gugga Gang did not take the one-ton vehicles or Jeeps of the soldiers. They had their own fleet of cars, which they had stolen from the rich and the vulnerable. The vehicles were modified so as to be useful in the gun fights.

Rizwan was further disappointed when he learnt that Commandant Krishnamurthy was not going to accompany them. 'If the need arises,' said the Commandant to console Rizwan's rising apprehensions. 'Major Sohrab will come to your assistance.'

He indicated to the black walkie-talkie that Gugga was holding in his left hand on which a tiny, red neon-lamp was flickering in the darkness. With those words, he retired to his quarters. Madam Suhasini did not come to the scene of departure at all, which Rizwan thought was very inconsiderate of her.

On their way to the first major offensive in the city of Srinagar, the Gugga Gang did not pay for the fuel they got filled in their vehicles. They were men of all ages. Some were just boys with beardless chins. Some were old enough to be grandparents. with white beards and skullcaps. Some had changed the colour of their hair and beard to henna red.

They trod over the florescent plastic cones on the roads. Made zigzag movements and hit the kerbs at will. Rizwan was relieved that it was still dark and no girl was walking on the roads. Gugga drove the open-hooded Jeep himself and made Rizwan sit in the front seat.

Patting on the sleek steering wheel, Gugga bragged. 'This…I took from the Polytechnic.' He waited for the information to sink in. 'I've also taken a wife…from Medical College… I'm sure you know where my kids will come from…' His laughter echoed in the darkness of the cold dawn. Rizwan contemplated the shooting puffs of his visible breath. The walkie-talkie in the breast pocket of his shirt was abuzz with the noise of its invisible world.

Although the route to Ratta Latta was not very far, they had to drive slowly through the narrow roads of the downtown area on account of the barricades soldiers had placed near their bunkers. At a few places, the road was blocked entirely. Gugga waited for his boys to clear the road for him.

'Gugga,' he yelled to dismiss the soldiers' dread of any militant attack. To their greetings of '*Jai Hind*', he replied with a raised hand: '*Jai Hind.*'

Chapter Nineteen

The square of Ratta Latta was deserted. No dogs. No birds. Not a soul walked by. Gugga laughed. 'How can I kill an absent enemy,' he said. 'Somebody wake them up!'

But Rizwan felt something strange about the deserted streets. It was not expected. It was already past five. *Fajr* prayers were over. There was no sound from the mosque loudspeakers. He looked at the arrogance of Gugga, wooing the neighbourhood to come out. All the doors and windows were shut. They had done their best not to let the people of Ratta Latta know that they were coming. *Was it a coincidence, then?*

'First, secure the gullies,' Gugga shouted at the peak of his voice. 'Then we will march on to Chinar Ghar. Remember,' he went on, 'we have the gift of aggression.' He stated his strategy and explained the quickest way to take control of Chinar Ghar. His main aim was to eliminate the two brothers. 'Once we have them,' he announced with a victor's grin, 'we have the city.'

'Commander Gugga,' shouted the boy standing in the middle of the Jeep, with his sub-machine gun resting on the hood-frame. His long black hair was held by a burgundy headband over his forehead.

'Zindabad,' shouted the boys in other vehicles.

'Shuttlecock,' shouted Gugga with a raised fist.

'Zindabad,' shouted the boys back.

Gugga turned to Rizwan and said casually, 'Looks like they knew we were coming and left Ratta Latta for good.' He laughed. 'Cowards!'

At that moment, a whooshing bullet hit the bonnet of the Jeep with a perceptible spark, ricocheted and buried itself in the adjacent mud-wall. Rizwan spotted the window the bullet came from. It was open a crack. He quickly indicated to Gugga, who in turn instructed the long-haired boy with a burgundy headband.

'Don't miss.' Gugga put the gear in reverse and turned the Jeep to the side of the mud-wall for a more strategic position. The noise was deafening, rat-a-rat… rat-a-rat… as the boy fired the sub-machine gun without stop.

Rizwan held his hands over his ears and saw the first militant boy drop off the window with his gun flying in the air. His skull shattered against the cement tiles of the deserted street. Rizwan was amazed at how quickly the shattered skull leaked the dark blood.

A street door suddenly opened outward. A young boy dashed past it, hurried to the fallen body, picked up the rifle and ran in the direction of Chinar Ghar.

Moments later, a barrage of bullets was fired from behind the numerous windows of the neighbourhood. Flying flakes of wood and shattered glass came down in the street, while Gugga Gang fired in return. Rizwan ran out of the vehicle and took refuge behind the mud-wall that ran parallel to the main road. Boys from other cars had alighted there and were readying their weapons.

'You want one?' asked a young boy with a brown beard on his small chin, adjusting hand grenades on his vest.

Rizwan nodded 'no'.

'What will you do then?' he asked.

Rizwan did not answer him and walked over to Gugga, who was checking the magazine of his AK-47 rifle. He inserted the curved magazine back into the slot with a metallic click and hurled a small pistol towards Rizwan. The act was so unexpected and baffling that Rizwan could do no more than catch the pistol.

'You stay behind,' Gugga commanded. 'Until I say, you don't move from this place.'

'Boys,' he continued, 'this is our chance to take Srinagar. Let's do it.'

They followed him with a roar.

Although Rizwan was accustomed to the violent behaviour of men, the mere thought of being part of it loosened his grip over his guts. He checked the pistol. It was .380 ACP and loaded. He slipped it into his trouser pocket and watched behind the mud-wall as the firing intensified.

Kaka Towel had not deserted, nor was he asleep. He was up and ready. Gugga Gang was just a handful of enraged boys. But so were Kaka's boys. The thought distracted him. But he did not let despair overwhelm him. He took a deep breath and tried to silence the whisperings of his mind.

*

Ratta Latta was mainly an intersection of two winding streets where a saint of ancient times was buried in the middle of the crossroads. They called it the Ratta Latta Chowk, which was liberated by Al-Chinar Mujahideen from the soldiers a month after Fareed Lala was shot dead.

To the east of this grave-shrine was the extended Mohalla and towards the north was the Chinar Ghar. The southern part mingled with the main road that connected it with the rest of downtown Srinagar. Rizwan stood on the main road from where the Gugga Gang started their assault.

'Al-Chinar ze't,' Gugga shouted in the air to raise the morale of his boys. He waited for them to join him as they advanced. *'Zache' Militant,'* he yelled.

'Kokrih Militant,' they yelled back.

Since they had not anticipated the assault from the unforeseen windows of the neighbouring houses, they retreated to the main road to re-devise their strategy. The first one who made a retreat found Gugga standing in his way. He stopped and dropped dead because Gugga shot him in the forehead to stall the crowd of boys who were following him.

'You don't go to where your fear leads you,' he shouted so that the other boys went back into the knotty streets to retaliate against the barrage of bullets coming from the half-open windows. The rate at which boys fell convinced Rizwan that the whole gunfight was not going to last till noon. Hot, prickly needles began to rise from his lower back as sunshine began to add heat to the excitement. His thoughts coincided with Gugga. 'We'll be done before *Zuhr*,' he shouted and danced to dispel his fears.

Gugga found a narrow lane that led to Chinar Ghar from the rear. At its mouth were the remains of the bunker that Kaka had won from the soldiers. It was the lane that Fareed Lala had taken to follow her husband. Gugga motioned Rizwan to come with him. 'I'll show you what we did to make it this far,' he said with conviction and turned down the volume of his walkie-talkie.

As the street deepened, it was too narrow for two of them to walk side by side, so Rizwan followed him. They walked stealthily by the closed windows because across the same rooms were gunmen waiting at the roadside windows for a head to bob.

*

Shaheen, sleepless in the twin bedroom of Mir Manzil, was unaware of the happenings at Ratta Latta. When she regained her senses, she found herself tied to the column of the *Wurusi* with a white cotton rope that had the undeniable earthy smell of sheep shit.

From the distant mosque loudspeakers came the sounds of *Azan*. She wondered what time of day it was until she recognised the thin, shrill voice of the *Muezzin* who called out the *Fajr Azan,* the way they did it on Pakistan TV. Then she looked towards the window. The curtains were not drawn, but it was dark outside. The shallow light of the red night lamp was reflected by the red-and-pink ceiling. *"The dawn is about to crack," she thought.* She tried to remember the past, but all the memories appeared vague.

When she pulled at the rope her hands were tied with, her wrists hurt. She was hungry and wanted to eat. Then she remembered the *Rista* vendor and the two menacing men. When the thought of having chopped off the earlobe of a stranger came before her eyes, her lips parted for a faint smile. She remembered her mother slapping on her face while she was restrained by the two menacing men. Then, her mother got a syringe from the ambulance and injected that into her deltoids. Moments later, when they dragged her towards the ambulance, Ghanta Ghar floated before her eyes, and the three o'clock crowd of Lal Chowk became unreal, like a dream.

The effects of the tranquillisers wore off slowly as the light began to enter the window. The hunger became palpable. She yelled so that they could hear her below in the kitchen. 'I'm dying of hunger,' she tried to scream. But her voice died in the twilight of the twin bedroom. The harder she tried to shout, the feebler her voice became. She continued to try until it was no longer possible for her to hear her own voice. She shook the rope again. Her wrists were sore.

She looked up in desperation and was reminded of Rizwan: *'We don't have apples in June.'* She had felt secure in his presence. In him lay her salvation. Bublee was right. No potion like love for a soul in torment. Now, that assurance was gone, perhaps forever. Then she wondered if anybody had lifted him from the footpath.

*

'You idiot,' Gugga rebuked Rizwan for sneezing while they were about to clamber the mud-wall of Chinar Ghar.

A window opened from a neighbouring house. A towering woman craned her neck out and yelled to the boys waiting under the tiny green apples. 'They are here,' she screamed. 'Behind the mud-wall. Kill them.'

Gugga aimed his AK-47 rifle at the towering woman and shot without stopping until the woman's face flew about in shreds. At that moment, a volley of bullets came from the top of the Chinar Ghar. Rizwan kept his back glued to the thick mud-wall. Occasionally, Gugga turned around and fired in the direction of the Chinar Ghar.

The exchange of fire continued as the soldier's helicopter started making rounds of the neighbourhood. Rizwan realised from his actions that Gugga was no longer in charge of himself despite the possible aerial support. White soapy foam had formed at the two edges of his mouth. His hands were trembling.

The needles that had started to rise from Rizwan's lower back began to recede because the sun had gone into a momentary hiding behind a wandering patch of cloud. A slimy feeling began to churn in his guts.

'You look very cold,' Gugga said, his own face dripping with fear.

On the other side, towards the Chowk, boys were slowly succumbing to the barrage of bullets coming from the half-open windows. Ratta Latta was unassailable and ever so elusive to outsiders. After a while, the firing from the Chowk became occasional until it stopped altogether. The colour from Gugga's face began to drain as the voices of the boys across the mud-wall came closer.

Gugga tried to look over the mud-wall to ascertain the position of Kaka's boys. But he only found a bullet shot in his forehead. His legs buckled, and he fell over. Blood leaked like a sad fountain from the hole in his forehead. Rizwan was alone now. He thought about his own death. He recollected Commandant Krishnamurthy's words regarding Rudraksha, the life-vest that he was never given. He felt cheated. Then he remembered the silenced walkie-talkie. He groped Gugga's dead body and found it in his shirt pocket. He pressed the red button and called for help. 'We are already on our way,' said Major Sohrab from the other side. 'Just hang on.'

Another window opened, and another middle-aged woman craned her neck and shouted at the boys across the mud-wall. 'He is talking to soldiers,' she shouted. 'But he is alone and unarmed. Come over. Finish him.'

Two boys jumped over the mud-wall and found Rizwan with his back glued to the wall. One of them aimed his AK-47 rifle at Rizwan's forehead when the other one stopped him. 'He is the one,' he said.

*

At that moment, Haji Abdul Wahid Darvesh began to speak from the loudspeaker of the mosque. '*Hazraat*… soldiers are coming to raid Ratta Latta…' he shouted in his hysterical voice. 'Everybody is requested to come out on the streets to save our *Mujahideen... Hazraat*…'

When the news reached Mir Manzil, Dr Firdousa asked Gopa to give Shaheen something to eat so that she could go to Mir Manzil with a clear mind. Gopa hurried upstairs but came down immediately. 'Her hands are tied,' he said. 'How can she eat?'

'She is Shaheen,' Dr Firdousa said while preparing herself for Chinar Ghar. 'She'll find a way.'

She was right. Because Shaheen held the bread in her mandibles and at the same time munched it with her teeth. Then she would drop the bread in her lap and gulp down *Nun chai*, holding the cup between her lips like a dog, until she had finished whatever Gopa had placed in front of her. It wasn't enough, so she yelled at the top of her lungs for more.

This time, Raja Begum came up because Dr Firdousa had already left. She hurled a piece of bread towards Shaheen. 'Eat,' she said with a twisted face, "… while soldiers wipe out your Chinar Ghar.'

Shaheen realised the truth slowly as all her senses awakened. Then she asked Raja Begum to untie her so that she could go to Chinar Ghar.

'No,' she said. 'You'll create another scene … as if you've not done enough to ruin our honour.'

Shaheen was enraged by the direct insult at the hands of a woman she had always loathed. 'May God give you basins of gold,' she shouted. Raja Begum was alarmed, thinking that Shaheen was trying to appease her. 'So that you could cough blood in it,' Shaheen continued. Then she went on calling unheard-of obscenities to her. Raja Begum hurried down with her shaking hands over her ears.

'Toba takseer. Toba takseer,' she went on speaking to angels while clambering down the staircase. 'Is she a girl? She is a devil!'

Shaheen jerked the rope so vehemently that it snapped in one go. Blood oozed from her sore wrists, but she did not feel the pain. She hurried down the stairs and dragged the Persian carpet with her careless feet. When Raja Begum tried to stop her, she pushed her over the porch. She met Gopa under the grapevine. The round fellow spread his arms not to stop her but to show his explicit surrender to her rage. She ran past the street door, and in the background, Raja Begum cried from the pain of her broken hip.

*

Dr Firdousa walked briskly through the lanes of her childhood only to find them narrower, dirtier and knottier. She joined the people of the neighbourhood, trying to stop the soldiers from entering Ratta Latta. She told them that she was the daughter of Chinar Ghar so that they would let her pass through the tightly packed crowd. As she reached the front, where boys were hurling stones at the soldiers sitting in their green trucks, she stopped for fear of getting hurt. The stones were too big to be dismissed as harmless.

At that moment Major Sohrab spoke on the hand-held loudspeaker. ‘Go home,’ he said. ‘We have nothing against you people. Let us do our duty.’

Enraged, the boys ran towards the green trucks, hurled stones, shouted ‘Indian dogs go back’ and other local obscenities.

Soldiers remained in the trucks without responding. On top of the truck that Major Sohrab was speaking from, two soldiers camouflaged under the green tarpaulin, fired with their sub-machine guns at the advancing boys.

Panic struck the crowd, and people began to disperse in different directions. Soldiers jumped out of the rear of the green trucks under the tarpaulin cover, recovered their balance and shot at the dispersing crowd. Then they shot at the open windows from where women were jeering at them. One after the other, either a woman fell, or the window was shut. Moments later, the women started wailing in their courtyards for the dead boys lying in the street.

Major Sohrab commanded his men to go for the assault. '*Jai Hind*,' he shouted at the top of his lungs. Then he instructed with his outstretched fist for the men to take positions as per the plan. All his moves were carried out in utter professional silence.

As the soldiers were about to cross the grave-shrine, a phantom of a mad woman in her milky-white dress passed by them like a streak of divine light. They stopped in their steps, paralysed by the heavy smell of stagnant waters. 'Did you see how beautiful she was,' Major Sohrab exclaimed in ecstasy. 'Like an apple.'

It was Shaheen on her way to save her Chinar Ghar. Dr Firdousa had tried to stop her in the crowd, but she pushed her away in the dispersing mob and hastened in her steps. She did not have to ask the boys to let her pass because they gave way to her, believing that she alone was capable of taking on the soldiers. In the haze of her rage, Shaheen did not heed the warnings of the soldiers near the Chowk, and never got to know how many bullets she had unwittingly escaped during her short burst through them.

When she reached the courtyard of Chinar Ghar, the soldiers had already taken position around the mud-walls. This time, the windows remained shut, and the soldiers began shooting at the boys hiding behind the windows. Boy militants got shot one after the other and began to tumble down from the windows like dead birds from the sky.

General Sikandar, instructing from the Chinar Ghar, trembled in fear as the shooting intensified and the noise of sophisticated weaponry invaded Ratta Latta. Commander Kaka had moved from the farthest neighbouring house to the next and then to the next as his boys got shot until he had reached the Chinar Ghar, where Commander Sikandar was preparing his boys to move out. He was held by the strong-willed Neelam Khanum. 'Nobody is moving from this place,' she said in her hoarse but steady voice. 'Our sacred duty is to resist. That is how we exist.'

After they conceded to her instructions, she let Boba and Tanvir go through Fareed Lala's door. She turned to Kaka and instructed him through the narrow slits of her black veil: 'Your duty is to survive. If Ratta Latta falls, the whole of Kashmir will fall. And that will be your fault.'

It turned out that they had only eleven usable guns for thirty-one boys. Five of them were AK-47 rifles, four Chinese pistols and two old revolvers. They had exhausted all the hand grenades at Ghanta Ghar. Twelve boys were already down. But Neelam

Khanum's timely words put fire back into the sinking hearts of Al-Chinar Mujahideen. Chinar Ghar reverberated with the war cries: *'Allah-o-Akbar... Allah -o-Akbar...'*

Kaka checked his Chinese pistol and was about to leave when General Sikandar stopped him with his arm and offered his rifle. 'Rifles are for distant hunters. I'm Kaka…' he said, '…I shoot in the face.'

*

In her hoarse voice, Shaheen cursed the soldiers as she passed by them like a hurricane, in the street. 'May you burn alive and perish when you are dead. May your hearts burst like hand grenades!' She would have gone on for hours together to give vent to her accumulated rage had she not spotted Rizwan being dragged by two uncouth boys inside the apple orchard.

'Rizwan,' she sighed. 'Why are you holding him?' She shouted at the boys. 'Leave him.'

'He brought the soldiers here,' said one of them. 'We are taking him to Commander Kaka.'

'Don't lie to me,' she cried. 'He is not that type. He is ...'

'Leave him,' Kaka commanded.

Shaheen could not believe it until Kaka came forward and held his pistol on the throbbing nerve of Rizwan's neck.

Shaheen was devastated. 'Don't,' she yelled, not knowing what else to do. 'Please, Chota Mamoo…' she pleaded.

Kaka did not heed Shaheen's cries and pulled the trigger. The gun didn't fire. He pulled the trigger once more. Nothing. *'Alhamdulillah,'* Shaheen said aloud out of great relief, and came down to her haunches in submission to Almighty.

When Kaka tried to fix his gun, she came running to him and embraced him so as to make it impossible for him to shoot.

Rizwan freed momentarily, ran for his life. A voice whispered in his head: *Guard your life because only the living could be liberated.* The realisation of being alive raised his spirits, and he remembered that he had a pistol. He cursed Commandant Krishnamurthy for not giving him the life-vest, and groped for the weapon, and found it in his trouser pocket. He took the gun out and aimed at Kaka, who was still struggling with the stuck safety latch of his Chinese pistol.

Now, Shaheen was alerted in a different way. The tables had turned for Rizwan and Chota Mamoo, but for her, it was equally harrowing.

She turned around, now in an attempt to shield Chota Mamoo. She was trembling as she watched Rizwan aim his gun at Chota Mamoo. She cried in her hoarse boyish voice, inciting the dogs, coiled and sleeping in the shade of mud- walls. The uproar of dog barks filled the stagnant air of Ratta Latta. The animals came jumping over the mud-walls and courtyard washroom roofs and wailed in unison. The barking roar shook the tiny, green apples on the numerous branches in the apple grove. The loose tin sheets of the courtyard washroom roofs fluttered with a wheeze.

Shaheen walked towards Rizwan because he was showing no signs of retreat. *'From unreal to real,' the* *subdued whispering began to scream in his head.*

When she was in the middle of her love and affection, Kaka fixed his gun and was ready to shoot. But with his hands trembling, Rizwan managed to shoot first and hit Kaka's heart.

Soldiers entered the Chinar Ghar courtyard and fired a barrage of bullets at bleeding Kaka. The momentum of bullets did not allow Kaka to collapse, and it was Major Sohrab who indicated for the fire to be ceased. 'Let him fall, for God's sake.'

Major Sohrab let Rizwan grieve over the failure of his love while his men finished rest of the militants in the Chinar Ghar by shooting mortar shells and grenades. Although the militants resisted for some time, the *Deodar* columns fractured under the impact of the exploding shells. Mud-walls with their living vegetation caved in as the corners fell apart. The labyrinthine corridors and the windowless rooms perished in the light of the day. Chinar Ghar was reduced to bloodied rubble and ashes.

All the dead, including General Sikandar, were dragged out and kept under the tiny green apples. Neelam Khanum could not be traced. Either she had been burnt alive, or she had escaped. Major told the reporters who came once Operation Shuttlecock was over, and trucks carrying earthbags were being unloaded near the grave-shrine.

Soldiers brought earth-bags on their curved backs to make Chinar Ghar their new garrison. 'I'll be in charge of this one,' Major Sohrab said with pride. 'I earned this… Thanks to you, Rizza Padukone.'

Chapter Twenty

Many months later, long after Al-Chinar Mujahideen was wiped out and the ruins of Chinar Ghar were converted into a garrison, Dr Firdousa, sitting on the porch with her back to the wall, her knees bent and her forehead resting on the bridge of her forearms, was startled by a moving shadow. At first, she imagined that the thought had occurred to her because she kept both her eyes shut against the sun. But then she looked hard into the tall vegetation that had forced itself through the gaps in the cobbled courtyard and leapt at the grapevine framework above. The phantom was stirring the vegetation. Only when the long, moving shadow spoke did she realise that it was a male voice. Forcing his way through the stiff weeds was the short Postman holding a manila envelope in his right hand.

'A letter from Umrika,' he declared, spitting out shreds of weeds from his mouth.

Raja Begum drowned in the pit of her decrepitude, raised herself from the legless chair in the dim-lit kitchen, picked up her skewed staff and dragged herself to the porch, panting. 'Finally,' she sighed and looked earnestly towards Dr Firdousa. 'My piece-of-liver.'

'Bublee,' Dr Firdousa replied sadly after reading the sender's details.

The letter smelled fragrant despite long travel and numerous handlings. The writing was tall and well spread out, written with a steady hand in many coloured inks. The folds were neat and crisp. Samir had finally gotten a scholarship from the Vedanta Society of New York to study Non-Dualistic Vedanta. They had chosen his application as part of a goodwill gesture on the centennial year of the Society. Bublee had gone with him to finish her studies there.

Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita was now the Country Head of the Jeevan Group of Hospitals, and was posted in New Delhi. She was currently with her kids, enjoying the American summer. In the postscript, she had sent 'Salaam' to Dr Firdousa. 'Tell the Principal Ma'am that I miss the days we were together at Kashmir Medical College and Hospital. I'll always miss the vegetable sandwiches we ate in the hospital canteen at lunch break. I'll always miss Kashmir. And I'll always be occupied nursing this open wound.'

Shaheen did not read the letter. She did not read any of the letters that Bublee sent following the desecration of her Chinar Ghar. She was too shocked despite having managed countless vagaries of life; *love had misled her.* She couldn't believe it. She couldn't live with it. She couldn't resist the impulse to destroy the appalling reality. So, she barred all the paths connecting to life. Her life for her was over. Now, it was only a matter of time.

She did not talk to anyone and did not come out of her room at all. She did not change her filthy milky-white kameez-shalwar that had now become polished, unrecognisable grey. She ate rarely and never touched water to wash her face. She lived with a constant, deep and sharp pain that twisted and turned inside her like a sharp knife with a flexible blade. Her twin bedroom was long abandoned by Gopa and had become the home for vermin and dust.

The *Wurusi* planks were rendered to powder by termites. The ajar windows were taken over by the unrestrained growth of the discoloured vine. The room was so grey that the pink-and-red tiles of the ceiling stopped reflecting. Cobwebs and dust hung from its square edges. It was hard, even for a happy man, to see in the gloom of that feeble light. The mirror of the teak-wood dressing table was shattered by Shaheen when she spoke her last words: *I was misled by love.*

Before Chota Mamoo fell in front of her stupefied eyes, riddled with countless bullets, she had looked at her Rizwan and pleaded to him not to shoot. 'Please,' she had begged in her unsteady voice of a niece. 'Don't shoot him, Rizwan. Forgive him. If you truly love me, make peace. Make peace, Rizwan, please.' But Rizwan's stony eyes did not move. He did not heed her words and she remembered his demeanour. He was rigid, his throat tightened by the rage of an orphaned-son, and his eyes filled with tears of pain.

Despite her pleading, he did not turn his face towards her. 'Look at me,' she yelled at him so that she could soothe his fury. 'Don't shoot. He is my Chota Mamoo. Rizwan.' She repeatedly uttered his name so that he could be reached. But he was unmoved. 'I'm begging you...For my loves' sake... Heart to heart, Rizwan,' she continued to plead. 'For your Shaheen's sake, Rizwan.' Her voice was hoarse and hysterical. But he was unmoved and fired the gun with his shaking hands.

She tried to come between the bullet and Chota Mamoo in her last attempt to save him. But her heart had already slipped down to her feet, and rendered her immobile. She could feel the whiz of the bullet pass by her outstretched arms. She tried to catch it. But the piece of lead raced between her closing hands and hit Chota Mamoo in his heart, leaving behind the heat of a passing bullet on her fingertips.

"Nothing like love for a soul in torment," she was often reminded of Bublee, her faithful companion. It stabbed at her heart because 'love' had crushed the very foundations of her life - the Chinar Ghar and her Mamoos. She laughed in the mirror in which she saw her weeping willow-like hair, and the red embers of love burning on her cheeks. It was then, in the cold rage against her unfair fate, that she said to the mirror that 'I was misled by love' and slapped love's embers on her cheeks non-stop until both her hands could not move because of fatigue and the red embers had come off with the skin of her cheeks.

The sound of the slaps echoed in her ears, maddened her, and reminded her of the rat-a-rat of the soldiers' shooting at Chota Mamoo. She wanted the sound to drown her senses and exhaust her will. But she was exasperated by fatigue and her inability to hurt herself to the point of death. It was then, in her sheer helplessness, that she struck her forehead into the mirror and crushed her image to bits.

She was so disconsolate that she stopped thinking forever. The only thought that she would entertain on rainy days and the nights of the moon was that of the shady valley with the trolling actress in blood-red half-pants, singing:

Jab hum jawan hoonge... jaane kahan hoonge...
Leykin jahan hoonge...wahan fariyaad karengey...
Tujhe yaad karengey...

She always moved her lips with each word of the song but did not make any sound.

No one heard her speak again, not even to herself, even in the deliriums of her intense and recurrent fevers caused by the infections of self-afflicted wounds. Her pale lily's skin fell off her face like Chinar leaves in the Fall. She peeled the skin off her hands along with the lines of her unfair fate. Her teeth fell one after the other for lack of eating and her intense black hair turned grey like the unbound pupils of her large eyes. She continued to live in the shell of her immeasurable gloom. For the world, she was no longer living.

But for Rizwan, orphaned and ostracised, she was his eternity. Sitting cross-legged under the upside-down octopus of a Chinar, he took long, satiating drags while looking out at the Residency Road. The space inside him expanded and accommodated the entirety of his life. He was with Shaheen in the elevator at Gulmarg. They were close to each other, scratching doodles on the brick walls of Pratap Park and at the same time, he saw her look at him with unearthly rage while soldiers riddled Kaka Towel with countless bullets at Chinar Ghar.

He was always like that, rooted in eternity, dispersed in time and space, living all that he had lived at many scattered points in his life. He did everything that he could do to make sure that he did not regain his worldly senses. He was content in the trance that *charas* induced in him.

When Kaka Towel had stopped writhing his body, Shaheen rebutted Major Sohrab for inviting her to be his love. 'Come …' he had said in his tender, lover's voice. 'Be my love red apple.'

'Go,' she cursed the Major in her rage. 'Fuck your black mothers.'

And then the Major, enraged and utterly disgraced, snatched a rifle from the hands of his soldier and hurled it towards Shaheen. Rizwan came between the flying weapon and his love, and the rifle butt hit him where the hot-prickly needles once used to arise from. He felt no pain because it brought him face-to-face with his love.

With her ashen pupils, Shaheen looked hard in his tear-loaded eyes only to make him understand that he was not indispensable and his love for her was not worthy of tomorrow. And then she said, '… and you…' She raised the forefinger of her right hand in his face so that there was no chance that Rizwan could misunderstand her. Her eyes were bereft of any hope. They were stony, and her hoarse, hysterical voice had the sad echo of finality. 'You,' she repeated. 'Go. Fuck yourself.'

After Chinar Ghar was levelled to the ground, Rizwan made many attempts to contact her, but she was not available. She was not heard cursing him, nor did she try to hide from him. Rizwan was not acknowledged in any manner. Neither did she love him, nor did she hate him in return for his love notes.

Rizwan continued writing to her for months in the hope that she would eventually be moved by his distress, until he saw his love letters floating in the city's surface drains in the form of small paper boats. His correspondence had never reached Shaheen. Gopa was instructed to throw the letters out on the street the moment the Postman delivered them.

During the period Rizwan wrote the concluding letters of his excruciating love, Nishat Bibi died without having regained her reason. Rizwan bathed her in the kitchen because no one came forward to do her last rites. His hands trembled when he rubbed the soap over her ribs, which were sticking out prominently through her greasy skin.

He buried her beside his bullet-riddled father in the courtyard of Ashiyana with a plain tombstone. He continued to bath his father and mother, and continued to bury them in his loneliness. He remained tethered to his past. The image of an unseen Rudraksha and Madam Suhasini's indifference sometimes battered his lonely heart. All came to him together, at the same time, equally, unequivocally real, for time left no traces of itself, as Samir had once said, '…because it doesn't exist.'

But for him, nights were different from days because he would often dream of a semi-darkness that pervaded the market of Lal Chowk, haggling in the grey, viscous air of an ever-elusive dawn. And the emaciated, naked man resting his fractured skull on top of Ghanta Ghar in place of the misleading clock, standing on his four forty-seven feet long skeletal limbs. The naked man struggled to speak under the immense weight of his giant mandibles. In the dreams, it was always evident that the blinded, naked man had a perforated face, which only reminded Rizwan of yesterday.

And now, apart from the numerous realities he was living simultaneously, he was looking out, through the rarefying cloud of the blue *charas*-smoke, at the wet nostrils of his buddy sitting across the circle, debating with his companion with the clogged, braided hair whether love was the journey of absurd or the destiny of unlucky. Rizwan knew that they were both wrong.

For him, love was something altogether different. It was a Phoenix in its own way. It would gather itself back every time indifference allowed it to get crushed. He was liberated by the knowledge that he could always remember Shaheen the way she had looked at him under the June sun, asking ardently with her bright -grey eyes, if she could get apples.

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About the Author

Pervez Yasin Shah was born and brought up in Srinagar, Kashmir. He is a Mechanical Engineer by profession, and has been writing for over ten years.

His first short story 'Waiting for Gulshan Ara' was published in Papercuts magazine in spring 2015. The story explores stupor of curfewed life.

'Killing of IB Agent Samir', a disturbing suspense story, was shortlisted for the 2nd rousnd of Cinestaan Screenwriting Contest 2014.

He is in the process of writing his second novel and has couple of short stories to his credit.

'Apples of June' is his first Novel.

Amid rising militancy and reign of ever stringent moral codes in the city of Srinagar, love sprouts in the heart of a disconsolate badminton champion, Rizwan. He falls for an uncouth and hostile collegiate, Shaheen.

As Rizwan wins Shaheen's heart, Kashmiri Hindus are forced to flee the valley, leaving the lovers utterly helpless in absence of Bublee Pandita - Shaheen's only friend and confidante. They invent novel ways to stay connected.

Kaka, Shaheen's militant uncle, kills Rizwan's father for publicly questioning the acts of militants. Kaka then goes after Rizwan to kill him for loving his niece. Rizwan join's hands with Commandant Krishnamurthy and becomes a renegade.

The lovers are separated. Will their love succumb to the tussle between soldiers and the militants? Or will the soul-healing notion of love revive Shaheen's lost hope?

APPLES OF JUNE is a story that reflects the inner working of life in Srinagar. A life that is fashioned by guns, fear, killings, comraderies and soul liberating combination of charas and love.

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Pervez Yasin Shah was born and brought up in Srinagar, Kashmir. He is a Mechanical Engineer by profession and has been writing for over a decade. His writings are mostly about Kashmir.

Among his short stories, 'Waiting for Gulshan Ara' and 'Killing of IB Agent Samir' are most notable.

'**APPLES OF JUNE**' is his first Novel.